

## Highlights from the National Conference

### HOUSING FOR SENIORS:

#### THE CHALLENGE IN NORTHERN AND REMOTE COMMUNITIES

##### INTRODUCTION

A three day conference on Housing for Seniors - The Challenge in Northern and Remote Communities was held September 29 - October 1, 1991 in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. This conference was recommended by participants at a series of twelve conferences on housing for seniors, during 1990, that were co-sponsored by CMHC with provinces and territories across Canada. They identified the need for a forum to address the special views and concerns of aboriginal and non-aboriginal seniors living in northern and remote communities in Canada.

The Seniors Secretariat of Health and Welfare Canada and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development provided financial assistance to ensure that a wide range of seniors could attend the conference. The Government of the Northwest Territories contributed the services of interpreters in five aboriginal languages. A Program Planning Committee assisted in the development of the conference program, in recommending speakers and in publicizing the conference. The Program Planning Committee included representatives of seniors organizations, aboriginal organizations, government agencies, the housing industry, the financial community, and the health and social service sectors. Over 220 conference participants, of whom almost sixty per cent were seniors, came from settlements in every province and both territories in Canada. Over fifty per cent of the participants were aboriginal people.

The objectives of the conference were twofold:

- ° to identify the issues involved in meeting the special housing and service needs of seniors living in northern and remote communities; and
- ° to discuss and formulate practical solutions to respond to those special housing and service needs, with particular emphasis on solutions that help seniors to remain in their communities and enjoy their preferred lifestyles.

The conference program included: opening ceremonies; an opening plenary in which speakers explored the range of issues that would be addressed during the conference; six workshops, each including three presentations from guest panelists followed by questions from participants, then discussion groups, which reported in-workshop; an international showcase, with presenters from Greenland and Alaska; and a closing plenary, where spokespersons presented the findings from each of the six workshops and two speakers examined the key issues and recommendations that had been discussed.

The core of the conference was the six workshops. Their topics were:

**Aging in Place: Adapting to Change** - which examined ways of helping seniors live in their existing homes for as long as possible;

**Living With or Close to Family: Enjoying Mutual Support** - where housing types and service arrangements that can enable seniors to live in close proximity to family members and benefit from mutual support were discussed;

**Living in Seniors' Housing: Opportunities in Small Communities** - which explored the types of small housing projects that can meet the needs of seniors who wish to remain in their communities;

**Continuum of Care Within a Community** - where the types of accommodation and range of services that are needed to enable frail seniors, or those with disabilities, to remain in their communities were examined;

**Housing Design for Lifestyles and Aging** - which addressed the need to design housing to reflect cultural and lifestyle differences and respond to changing needs as people become older and frailer; and

**Delivering, Maintaining and Managing Housing** - where the ways of using resources most effectively to provide a range of housing options to seniors in sparsely populated communities were examined.

A detailed report of the conference proceedings will be published in March 1992. The proceedings report will summarize the issues, options and recommendations presented and discussed in each of the workshop sessions. In the meantime, this interim report highlights those issues, ideas and recommendations that received widespread support from participants.

## HIGHLIGHTS

The issues and recommendations outlined on the following pages are those expressed by conference speakers and participants and do not necessarily represent the position of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. As participants were drawn from many geographic areas and from both aboriginal and non-aboriginal groups, it should be recognized that some issues and recommendations will only be of importance to certain groups.

In the discussion groups, participants were encouraged to express their concerns and priorities in their own terms and were not limited to addressing workshop themes. This resulted in many of the following issues and recommendations being raised and supported in several workshops.

### Shared Beliefs

It was apparent that the following beliefs were fundamental to the conference, and shared by the overwhelming majority of participants.

- ° Seniors want to remain in their own communities and many prefer to continue to live in their existing homes for as long as possible. Moving to a special care facility, particularly if it is located in another community, is seen as a last resort.
- ° Seniors' priorities, whether a commitment to caring for their children and grandchildren, a dread of being "relegated to the fringe of society", or a desire to be safely housed away from abusive family members, should be accepted as a basis for planning.
- ° Given the trend away from the institutionalization of elderly people toward providing care in the community, it is no longer sensible to address housing for seniors without simultaneously addressing support services for seniors.
- ° Housing, social and health needs are fused in everyday life, but the current systems of responding to these needs are not integrated, resulting in labourious communication between users and providers, and responses that are often not timely or appropriate.
- ° Aboriginal cultures are very different from mainstream Canadian society, and problems/solutions in northern and remote regions are different from those in large urban centres, thus there is a need to be knowledgeable about these differences and apply this knowledge in developing policies and in delivering housing and services.

## ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It should be noted that many of the speakers outlined current and planned activities of their organizations/agencies that are designed to respond to the following issues and recommendations. These activities will be described in the upcoming proceedings report.

### Consultation

It is essential to consult with seniors and other members of communities about the planning, design, location, delivery, and management of seniors' housing that will become part of a community, and be prepared to take the culture, lifestyle and characteristics of the community into account.

Participants' recommendations:

- ° Providers of seniors' housing should consult with: seniors' groups, perhaps in workshop sessions; other community members (because any housing project has an impact on an entire community); and individual seniors in their own homes, "face to face", to find out precisely what features of their housing and living arrangements work, or do not work, and why.
- ° Communities must do their "homework" and "bring it to the table" when negotiating with providers of housing and support (health and social) services. This preparation could include: organizing a truly representative group to present the views of different segments of the community; preparing an inventory of financial and human resources available to the community and an analysis of the community infrastructure; developing demographic and capability profiles of the seniors in the community and projections showing how these are likely to change; and preparing an outline of community-specific priorities and lifestyles that will underlie decision-making.
- ° CMHC and provincial and territorial housing agencies should establish mechanisms to enable seniors to register their suggestions and concerns about housing on an on-going basis and to communicate in their own language. There is a need to reassure some seniors that they can express their concerns without fear of reprisals.

- ° Consultation is necessary in every community, because it is not reasonable to generalize about "people in remote areas" or "an aboriginal lifestyle". There are many different peoples, cultures, and lifestyles in remote areas of Canada, and within the aboriginal population. These may be manifested in very different needs and preferences in terms of housing and support services.
- ° Architects and planners working with small communities must ensure that the people who claim to "represent the community" during consultations in fact do. A lack of true representation and thorough consultation can result in projects that are inappropriate, or simply not used.
- ° Consultation with potential users of seniors' housing can be facilitated by using small scale model kits, with moveable components, to illustrate alternative designs for dwellings and housing developments. With the help of interpreters, seniors can explain the reasons for their choices of shapes, sizes, placement and inclusion or exclusion of components and facilities using a scale site model.

### Support Services

Providing a range of culturally appropriate services that support independent living and enhance the social integration of seniors is at least as necessary as planning and delivering housing for seniors.

Participants' recommendations:

- ° There must be adequate support services in place before independent housing units are built for seniors. These support services could include meals, personal care, nursing care, physiotherapy, homemaking and home maintenance provided in seniors' homes, as well as opportunities for recreational activities outside their homes either at community gathering places or in the communal spaces within senior's housing projects.
- ° Training of service providers should be adapted to, or at least responsive to, aboriginal cultures and should have set standards. Also, aboriginal people should receive training so that they can deliver culturally-appropriate services in their own communities.

- ° Services should be made easily accessible to seniors by: using effective ways of disseminating easily understandable information on the services that are, or could be, available; ensuring that seniors can deal with staff that understand their languages and cultures; and providing barrier-free access to administrative offices and service facilities.
- ° Whenever possible, health care services should be available in small communities, so that seniors do not have their medical problems compounded by having to leave their community and travel long distances to a city for treatment or long-term care.

### Integration of Generations

The notion of housing seniors in age-segregated housing projects is foreign to many aboriginal people, for whom an extended family living under one roof is the norm.

The majority of comments from participants reflected the view that it was inappropriate to provide aboriginal seniors with one-bedroom segregated housing, as they would be unable to assume their mutually supportive role within the extended family, particularly their grandparenting role which typically involves having a number of grandchildren living with them. Based on this view, participants recommended the following two options:

- ° Housing built for aboriginal seniors should include at least two bedrooms to enable them to accommodate their grandchildren.
- ° Housing built for aboriginal families should be designed to accommodate an extended family (i.e. including grandparents).

It became apparent, however, from other comments, that some seniors fear abuse from family members, or neighbours, and therefore participants recommended that:

- ° Secure, segregated housing should also be available to seniors, because for some, living within the extended family is not a preferred situation. Minimum security features would include good outdoor lighting, locked storage units, and a locked entrance.

- ° Seniors' housing projects should, notwithstanding the need for security, include communal space that encourages social interaction among both residents and different generations from the community. Community meeting places for seniors should include programming that encourages the participation of children.

### Appropriate Design

Housing designs based on southern concepts and building codes frequently do not fit the reality of the lifestyles or the climate of northern and remote areas, whether in terms of location, interior layout, materials, required utilities or insulation requirements. Likewise, program requirements, limits and eligibility criteria often conflict with aboriginal traditions.

Because the design of housing and the rules of assisted housing programs are often regarded as unrealistic by people living in remote areas, particularly aboriginal people, participants recommended that:

- ° Aboriginal and northern people should be involved in developing building codes and standards that reflect their lifestyles and are suitable for northern and remote locations.
- ° People from aboriginal and remote communities should be formally included in decision-making in the offices of CMHC and provincial and territorial housing agencies that serve northern and remote areas.
- ° Building code requirements relating to sewers, running water and the use of certain building materials should be made more flexible, since they are not always realistic, particularly in far northern situations.
- ° Housing should be designed to meet changing requirements over the life-cycle of a family and to be easily adaptable to meet the needs of seniors who wish to age-in-place. This is particularly important in small remote communities where it may not be economically feasible to provide a range of housing choices.
- ° The Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP) guidelines should be more flexible to allow for seniors' needs (e.g. income criteria, levels of funding and requirements to carry-out repairs for which the cost exceeds the forgivable portion of the loan).

° The design of the model garden suite (displayed at the conference) should be modified in the following ways in order to appeal to aboriginal and other northerners:

- there should be two exits, because of the constant threat of fire, coupled with the possibility of snowdrifts blocking one exit;
- the kitchen should be large enough to accommodate a kitchen table and several chairs, so family and friends can sit around the table for meals and visits; and
- there should be fewer partitions inside the unit - many aboriginal people prefer an open, shared living space.

Given that not all aboriginal people share the same lifestyle and preferences, garden suites, if they are used at all in aboriginal communities, would have to be modified to suit the preferences of each different community. Some participants also suggested that garden suites could be site-built rather than manufactured.

° Support services for seniors must be designed to reflect their base level of need - for example, in some communities, their needs are basic to survival, such as the need for firewood - rather than being based on an urban set of criteria.

° Some First Nations participants expressed the view that, because it is not part of their tradition to pay for accommodation, the requirement that they pay rent for social housing should be abolished.

### Economic Benefits from Housing

Individual recipients of housing now benefit from the shelter it provides, but the whole community is not benefitting economically from the provision of housing to the extent desired. The successful construction of 500 homes under the recent CMHC Rural and Native Housing Demonstration Program was cited as evidence of the effectiveness of involving local people in the construction of their own homes.

Participants made the following recommendations, with the objectives of: creating employment in northern and remote communities, particularly on reserves; promoting pride in and ownership of housing; and enabling governments and communities to achieve more with available resources:



The first of the major results of the study is that the majority of respondents (75%) reported that they had used a computer in the last 12 months. This is a significant increase from the 55% reported in the previous study.

The second major result is that the majority of respondents (65%) reported that they had used a computer in the last 6 months. This is a significant increase from the 45% reported in the previous study.

The third major result is that the majority of respondents (55%) reported that they had used a computer in the last 3 months. This is a significant increase from the 35% reported in the previous study.

The fourth major result is that the majority of respondents (45%) reported that they had used a computer in the last 1 month. This is a significant increase from the 25% reported in the previous study.

The fifth major result is that the majority of respondents (35%) reported that they had used a computer in the last 2 weeks. This is a significant increase from the 15% reported in the previous study.

The sixth major result is that the majority of respondents (25%) reported that they had used a computer in the last 1 week. This is a significant increase from the 10% reported in the previous study.

The seventh major result is that the majority of respondents (15%) reported that they had used a computer in the last 3 days. This is a significant increase from the 5% reported in the previous study.

The eighth major result is that the majority of respondents (10%) reported that they had used a computer in the last 24 hours. This is a significant increase from the 5% reported in the previous study.

### Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the use of computers has increased significantly over the last 12 months. This is a positive trend that reflects the growing importance of technology in our lives.

The study also found that the majority of respondents reported that they had used a computer in the last 6 months. This suggests that the use of computers has become a regular part of many people's lives.

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- ° There should be a greater involvement of communities and local people in the construction, adaptation, repair and maintenance of housing (and public buildings).
- ° Training should be provided, in the communities, to provide local people with necessary skills (Some participants suggested that funds should be made available, for training programs, by agencies such as Employment and Immigration Canada and CMHC and that these funds be channelled through independent construction companies rather than public and political organizations).
- ° Certain components of housing (e.g. cabinets and storage units) could be built in communities during the off-season for construction, to maximize local employment opportunities.
- ° Members of communities, particularly aboriginal communities, should be responsible for the management of any social housing and should receive training to help them in exercising this role. Special training should be provided for those involved in managing seniors' housing.

### Substandard Living Conditions

Many people in the remote and northern communities of Canada, especially aboriginal people, are living in housing that is overcrowded and not well built ("you can see daylight through cracks and the wind comes in").

Participants recommendations:

- ° In order to reduce overcrowding, more housing should be allocated to communities where the population is growing rapidly (this is especially the case in aboriginal communities) and existing housing should be upgraded, adapted or extended, whenever these measures are practical and appropriate.
- ° Housing should be better built and maintained (This may result if some of the foregoing recommendations are implemented).
- ° Materials that have been tested in a northern climate, and which are familiar to local tradesmen, should be used whenever possible.
- ° Electrical service should be made available to all remote communities.

### Inaccessible Information about Housing Programs

Although there are several federal/provincial/territorial cost-shared and unilateral programs and initiatives that can benefit seniors, many people in northern and remote communities are not informed about them or do not understand them.

The participants, many of whom learned about certain housing programs (such as the Rural and Native Housing Demonstration Program) and certain housing options for seniors (such as the garden suite) for the first time at the conference, strongly recommended that:

- ° Written material from CMHC and provincial and territorial housing agencies should be translated into aboriginal languages for those seniors who can read, and communicated in other ways for those who cannot - such as through television, radio, and public meetings.
- ° Seniors should be able to discuss program details, such as eligibility criteria, with CMHC and housing agency officials who understand their culture and language.

### **CONCLUSION**

At the closing session participants were asked to take back the ideas and recommendations from the conference for consideration by their communities and organizations. They were also reminded of the commitment by the Minister Responsible for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to examine and consider the conference findings and discuss them with his federal colleagues and his provincial and territorial counterparts.