

EngAgeBC

Aging in Place, But Better



Aging “in place,” might not be all it’s cracked up to be

By 2036, 1 out of 4 Canadians will be over 65.¹ This will result in broad economic and health system challenges for Canadians and a host of other countries across the world. For years, governments, decision makers and advocacy groups have looked to aging in place as the solution to support seniors while managing scarce health care resources, but there is evidence to suggest that aging “in place,” at least as we have traditionally thought about it, might not be all it is cracked up to be.

By 2036, 1 in 4 Canadians will be over 65 – we are already starting to see impacts on the health care system.

Older adults say they want to age independently, but many who do have unmet needs, feel lonely or are at risk for falls or nutritional challenges.

This is particularly true when older adults don’t have access to adequate home health services.

A recent (2020) National Institute of Ageing (NIA)/TELUS Health Survey found that 91 percent of Canadians of all ages, and almost 100 percent of Canadians 65 years of age and older, plan on supporting themselves to live safely and independently in their own home for as long as possible.² In large part, older adults are successful in meeting this goal. Statistics Canada reports that, in 2016, 93.2% of seniors lived in private dwellings (house, apartment or moveable dwelling) while 6.8% lived in collective dwellings, such as “residences for senior citizens, long-term care homes or health care related facilities.”³

However, as referenced in NIA’s report, remaining in a private dwelling also comes with challenges. About one-quarter of Canadians aged 75 and over has at least one unmet need with respect to their activities of daily living.

In addition to having unmet needs, many older adults who live alone also feel lonely. In 2021, 37 percent of Canadian seniors reported feeling isolated, often or some of the time.⁴ Living alone and life transitions such as a death of a spouse or losing a driver’s license increase the risk of becoming socially isolated.⁵ Loneliness has impacts on health which are so significant, it can be compared to factors such obesity and physical inactivity.⁶

[1] Statistics Canada. 2014. “Government of Canada — Action for Seniors report.” Accessed at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/seniors-action-report.html>.

[2] National Institute on Ageing. October, 2020. “Almost 100 per cent of Older Canadians Surveyed Plan to Live Independently in their Own Homes, But Is This Even Possible?” Retrieved at: <https://www.nia-ryerson.ca/commentary-posts/2020/9/22/almost-100-per-cent-of-older-canadians-surveyed-plan-to-live-independently-in-their-own-homes-but-is-this-even-possible>.

[3] Statistics Canada. June, 2019. “Report on housing needs of seniors.” Accessed at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/report-seniors-housing-needs.html>.

[4] Canadian Institute for Health Information. “How Canada Compares Results From the Commonwealth Fund’s 2021 International Health Policy Survey of Older Adults in 11 Countries.” 2022. Accessed at: <https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/how-canada-compares-cmf-survey-2021-chartbook-en.pdf>.

[5] Government of Canada. “Report on the Social Isolation of Seniors, 2013-14.” Last modified 2016. Accessed at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/national-seniors-council/programs/publications-reports/2014/social-isolation-seniors/page05.html>

[6] Holt-Lunstad J, Timothy Smith and Bradly Layton. “Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review.” PLOS Medicine 7, no.7 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

The physical spaces where many older adults live, also result in challenges, particularly in terms of falls. Older adults have the highest risk of death or serious injury from a fall and this risk increases with age. Of Canadian seniors who sustain fall-related injuries, over two-thirds sought medical treatment, most often from an emergency department.

Modifications to interior environments (such as those found in independent living homes) can reduce the probability of falls and injuries.⁷ This includes features such as appropriately placed light switches and electrical sockets, grab bars, walk-in showers and bathtubs, non-slip flooring, wider hallways as to accommodate mobility devices, fall-preventing furniture in common areas, and so forth.

Malnutrition is another problem for many older adults. More than 4.1 million older Canadians, or over one third overall, are on the cusp of malnutrition. This is particularly significant for people who live at home, of whom 49% were at nutritional risk, compared with 28% of those who lived with a spouse or other companion.⁸

This is not to overlook the challenges faced by the growing number of family caregivers (largely women). While caregiving has been noted to have some positive outcomes for those providing support, it is generally well documented to also have negative psychological, health, and financial and professional impacts.

Across Canada, 7.8 million people provided care to a family member or friend with a "long-term health condition, a physical or mental disability, or problems related to aging."

When we think about aging in place, we often think about remaining in the homes we have lived in for a long time, or maybe even raised our families in, but what if there was something better?

A note about home support: Home health care can support seniors who choose to age in their own homes, but it can also act as an additional layer of support for seniors who move into independent living communities and need support either permanently, or temporarily. Home health care is available as a publicly subsidized service, but many older adults pay privately for home care or home support .

[7] Shabboo Valipoor, Pati Debajyoti, Kazem Zadeh Mahshad, Sahar Mihandoust, and Soheyla Mohammadigorji. "Falls in Older Adults: A Systematic Review of Literature on Interior-Scale Elements of the Built Environment." *Journal of Aging and Environment*, 34, no.3 (2020):1-24. DOI:10.1080/02763893.2019.1683672

[8] Ramage-Morin, Pamela L. and Garriguet Didier. Statistics Canada, Health Reports, 24, no. 3 (2015). Nutritional risk among older Canadians. Accessed at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2013003/article/11773-eng.htm>.

Helga's Story



Helga first started to think about independent living ten years ago. Now, she lives at Augustine House, swims three times a week and enjoys the flexibility to be alone when she wants to, and to enjoy the company of others the rest of the time.

I used to live in Kelowna and moved to be closer to my daughter. Before moving I went "shopping." I rented a guest suite to see if I would like it here, and stayed for a week.

It's like living in a hotel, I can go and stay as I choose. If I want company, I have company. If I want to go out, I go out. There are no special rules, I just sign-in and sign out.

I like that someone does the cooking for me. I don't have to worry about what food to buy, what I'm going to cook. I don't have to worry about the roof going, the wiring in my house, anything like that. That's what I like best.

There is a staff person here who keeps people moving and doing things. I'm learning snooker! We had a Hawaiian day yesterday. Everyday, there is something going on. If you want to join, you join. If you don't that's okay too.

Helga's advice for others:

It's a big decision. A different chapter in your life. See if they have a guest suite and stay for at least three days. Go ahead and shop around, see if it feels good for you, and then you choose! [Once you've moved] join everything they offer and keep the activities you like and discontinue the rest.

Independent living, you might have thought about it...

Independent living is a good option for seniors who are confident and comfortable living alone, but who don't want to worry about things like home maintenance, housekeeping, or cooking.

Sometimes independent living is called supportive living, retirement living or seniors' living. Many residents find that this type of housing:

- Helps them feel more socially connected.
- Supports them to be as healthy as possible, both physically and cognitively.
- Helps them eat well.
- Helps them feel secure, knowing help is there if they need it.

Independent living also brings the best in activities and recreation to you, through amenities and programming, and by bringing like-minded people together.

Research commissioned by EngAge BC indicates that over two thirds of people (76%) aged 45+ have a positive impression of independent living, however, research also shows that most people feel that this housing and hospitality model is for someone "older than them," regardless of their actual age.

Unfortunately, this internalized ageism prevents many seniors from benefitting from the housing and hospitality model.

Facts about independent living:

- Independent living homes often include hospitality services such as meals, housekeeping, laundry and recreation activities.
- Sometimes independent living is part of a campus, where assisted living, long-term care or memory care are also offered. Other times the residence only offers independent living.
- Services and programming in independent living focus on maintaining "wellness," rather than treating illness. It is a lifestyle choice.
- Staff are available, but residents come and go as they please.
- Buildings are purpose built to reduce the likelihood of falls and other accidents and improve quality of life. This includes features such as appropriately placed light switches, non-slip floors, grab rails and other accessibility and safety features.
- Some residents will receive home health services from a private company, or the health authority while living in independent living.

What if the independent living model was embraced as a way to offer seniors the best quality of life possible, while supporting them to stay well for longer?

Not your parent's seniors living home...



Today's independent living residences often include pubs, lounge areas, exercise programs, and opportunities to be as social as you choose.

Independent living could have benefits for you

Healthier



Staying active can help you stay cognitively and physically healthy and can delay or reduce diseases like certain kinds of dementia, cardiovascular conditions, and diabetes. Opportunities for recreation are regularly offered in independent living homes and are adjusted to accommodate resident preferences.

Happier



Independent living can help you feel more connected, through:

- Activities.
- Peer-to-peer connections.
- Reduced reliance on transportation.

Purpose built



Independent living homes are purpose built, this includes features such as appropriately placed light switches and electrical sockets, grab bars, walk-in showers and bathtubs, non-slip flooring, wider hallways as to accommodate mobility devices, fall-preventing furniture in common areas, and so forth. This reduces falls and improves accessibility.

Secure



Most independent living homes offer optional check-in services, and emergency call systems. Staff are on site 24/7 and will support you if you have a fall, by contacting family or first responders.

Nutritious



Many operators offer two meals a day, and some offer grab-and-go breakfasts and snacks, café or pub services and happy hours. Not only will you enjoy beautiful dining room settings with excellent service, but you will also benefit from nutritionally balanced meals in a social environment, while not having to do any of the cooking or cleaning.

Some things you may not have thought about

More affordable than you may think

When you consider all the costs associated with staying in your own home – utilities, unexpected repairs and maintenance, property taxes and so forth – independent living can be a relatively affordable and worry-free alternative.

A living situation that changes as your life does

Sometimes, health conditions change. Independent living allows you to layer on home support, or even transition to a care model, on the same property.

Many choices to fit your needs and lifestyle

Independent living homes aren't all the same. Whether you are looking for something nestled in the centre of a city, something with fabulous décor, with access to great activities, or that provides plenty of faith-based programming, there is something that's perfect for you.

Big Benefits for You, Even Bigger Benefits for Society

From cultural revolutions, to environmentalism, your generation has changed the world. Choosing independent living can be just one more way to leave a legacy and contribute to a better future for the next generation.

Continuing to combat climate change

We now know more about the threats of climate change than ever before. While most of us are concerned about the environment, many of us also feel hopeless about what we can do to affect meaningful change. Optimizing your square footage is one thing you can do to make a positive difference.

Greater square footage is associated with higher greenhouse gas emissions and single-family homes with greater vehicle use. In other words, the carbon footprint of a senior living in a single-family home is much greater than a senior living in modern congregate living. High-density housing, such as independent living, is one, considerable way seniors can reduce their environmental footprint. Modern retirement buildings are often also more energy efficient.

Increasing housing supply for young families

When seniors think about the challenges facing their children and grandchildren, affordability and availability of housing is often top of mind. Your decision to “right-size” has a direct impact on creating housing opportunities for young families.

Approximately 25% of Canadian households are led by people over the age of 65 years. Of these households, 75% own and 25% rent accommodation.⁹ Across Canada, many older adults are living in homes which may have served them well when they had children at home, but are now larger than may be necessary, and difficult to maintain.

By the same token, many younger people in B.C. struggle to find suitable housing due to housing shortages and a lack of affordability. A recent report by the National Bank of Canada, indicated that an annual household income of \$267,641 is now needed to afford an average house in the Vancouver region, which is now worth \$1.6 million, illustrating the effects of rising demand and limited housing supply.¹⁰

Certainly, many baby boomers who do decide to sell will be the beneficiaries of housing markets which have dramatically increased over the last number of decades, particularly in urban centres, allowing them to consider options such as independent living, while freeing housing stock up for younger families and for redevelopment, resulting in greater density.

[9] Government of Canada. Report on housing needs of seniors. June, 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/report-seniors-housing-needs/report-seniors-housing-needs-EN.pdf>

[10] “Housing affordability worsens by the most in 27 years in Q2 2021.” National Bank of Canada. August, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.nbc.ca/content/dam/bnc/en/rates-and-analysis/economic-analysis/housing-affordability.pdf>.

Protecting the health care system

Independent living can keep you healthy, and helps you stay as independent as possible if you experience health concerns later in life. It also ensures that scarce health resources are available for the people who need them most.

British Columbians are already facing challenges accessing services, and when this is considered alongside Canada's rapidly aging population, there is a strong indication that the worst is yet to come.

While there is no argument that governments must act now to ensure that the appropriate supports can be provided to seniors, meeting the growing need will be costly. While some older adults will always require medical services (i.e., long-term care and assisted living), implementing upstream approaches, can reduce the demand on the health care system, by helping older adults avoid the need for more costly services, which offer less independence.

Reducing stress

Independent living means less stress for you, but it can also mean less stress for the people who love and support you.

As a person becomes older, it often becomes more difficult to maintain their home.¹¹ While older adults can be reluctant to move into an independent living environment, those who do, often note that they feel reduced stress following the transition. According to EngAge BC operators, new residents frequently speak to the freedom they feel when they no longer need to manage home-related tasks, such as doing the shopping, performing home or lawn maintenance, worrying about security, or thinking about what would happen if they experienced a fall, or other health event. As almost anyone who has been a caregiver can tell you, these feelings are mirrored by family members. With your day-to-day activities now supported, your family can focus on just being a family member.



There are many personal benefits to independent living, but there are also societal ones.

Considering independent living? What next?

Choosing an independent living provider is not an easy decision. Use the simple checklist found at www.route65.ca/assurity to help select an independent living residence that you can have confidence in.

Looking to explore independent living options in your community? Visit www.route65.ca to learn more about your options.

About EngAge BC

EngAge BC is an operating arm of BC Care Providers Association, which has represented the continuing care sector for over 40 years, together we work with over 430 long-term care, home health care, assisted living, independent living, and commercial members across the province.

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Note

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