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## What's good for Vancouver seniors is good for us as a whole

Martha Perkins

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Between these three women there are 271 years of life — and all the stories that go with it. Violet, centre, is 91 while Tanja and Ida are 90. They still live on their own and want to keep it that way for as long as possible. Their independence is important to them, but so are programs offered by the West End Seniors Network, such as the weekly knitting group. — Martha Perkins

Not thinking about something in the hope it won't happen is never the most effective coping strategy. And it definitely won't work as a plan for dealing with the challenges of getting older. That's as true for us as individuals as it is for us as a society.

Given that the largest cohort of Canadians Baby Boomers is starting to qualify for seniors discounts and old age pensions, we need to be putting a lot more thought into how we're going to provide, let alone pay for, an ever-increasing need for services.

Eric Kowalski is the executive director of the [West End Seniors Network](#), which has 860 members, eight staff and more than 200 volunteers. No matter how many stories he's heard about seniors who are finding it more and more difficult to live on their own, we can't get traction on the changes that need to be set in motion, especially when it comes to how expensive rents can be in this city.

It's a decision we've made as a society to let the market be our guide to housing prices, he says. If we want to make it affordable for seniors to stay in their homes, then we have to come up with the funding models that make it possible.

It's an actual decision, he says. It's not, "This is the way it should be." It's a decision about what we want society to look like.

Although news stories often focus on rent-a-victions tenants who are tossed out of apartments so the landlords can make changes that allow them to charge more rent, think about the gradual impact of a modest two or three per cent annual increase in rent.

If you retire at 65 and are still in your home at 80, which many of us will be, that's 15 years of accumulated rent increases at a time when your income is barely changing. A \$50 rent increase, on top of dozens of rent increases over the years, can suddenly become the tipping point between making healthy choices and becoming frail or ill.

There are some rent assistance programs, such as the province's Shelter Aid For Elderly Renters, but SAFER calculates its rent subsidies on a maximum rent of \$700 a month. How many West End apartments are \$700 a month?

In the first year of the Vancouver Rent Bank, more than half of the loans went to people who are older than 55.

We need the provincial and federal governments to be more involved in creating more affordable housing for seniors, Kowalski says.

If a senior can't afford the rent, or gets sick because they're having tea and toast for dinner, think of how much it would cost to put them in a care facility. It's far less expensive to provide services in people's homes, which is why the WESN is the lead agency for Better At Home. Programs include subsidized transportation through a network of volunteer drivers and subsidies for light housekeeping.

On a local level, the City of Vancouver has to be aware of how small things can be big obstacles for seniors.

By adding more benches, the city would provide more places for seniors to rest when they walk to the grocery store. Sidewalks need to be better maintained so that people with mobility or sight problems don't trip and fall.

Encouraging more bicycle traffic is a great idea. Kowalski is a cyclist but if there are no parking spaces, elderly people's friends and relatives will be less inclined to visit.

An additional half-block walk to a bus stop can make a difference between getting out and staying at home. The group of [Happy Hookers knitters](#) at WESN's Barclay Manor also say that while roundabouts can be attractive ways to slow down traffic in residential areas, drivers tend to forget about pedestrians and tall plants can block a motorist's view.

Although Kowalski knows of the challenges seniors face, he also praises what's been done to make the West End a liveable, friendly, and supportive neighbourhood. It's great, but let's not rest on our laurels, he says.

And when we're making decisions about where we as a society should be spending money, remember that doing nothing for seniors will cost us in the long run. Sooner or later, we'll have proof of that in our own lives.

### **Help for those at home**

A little help can go a long way when it comes to helping seniors stay in their homes. The West End Seniors Network offers friendly visiting, daily callers, accompaniment to medical appointments and grocery shopping. Call Melanie at 604-669-5051 to sign up or volunteer.

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- See more at: <http://www.wevancouver.com/lifestyle/what-s-good-for-vancouver-seniors-is-good-for-us-as-a-whole-1.883899#sthash.8SE1p3AN.dpuf>