

United Way shortfall cuts off funding to 31 seniors groups

Contracts with 31 organizations total \$1.65 million

By Gerry Bellett and Matthew Robinson, Vancouver Sun April 6, 2014



United Way has expanded its Better at Home program, which is a partnership with the provincial government to provide non-medical home support for seniors living in their own homes, and it is now available in 68 communities across the province.

Photograph by: Vincenzo D'Alto , The Gazette

Thirty-one seniors' organizations funded by the United Way of the Lower Mainland have been told their funding will not be renewed once their contracts expire, leaving seniors who are dependent on the programs out in the cold.

The contracts are worth a total of \$1.65 million and expire either this year or next.

"All our grants will be fulfilled so there's no actual cuts being made," United Way president and CEO Michael McKnight said Friday.

"Some of the grants we make to organizations weren't renewed. That happens on a regular basis."

The termination of the 31 contracts follows a reduction in donations to the United Way.

Among the people hit by the terminations will be the dozens of seniors who rely on \$250,000 in annual United Way funding for the Seniors Services Society's temporary housing program. The program, now poised to collapse in September, takes homeless seniors from the streets or out of shelters and puts them into basic private rooms in apartment buildings until they can get permanent housing, said Kara-Leigh Bloch, executive director of the society.

"This is devastating," Bloch said Sunday, adding that without the program, seniors are "going back to the hospital, they're going back to the shelter, they're going back to the streets."

"This is not the way their dignity should be dealt with."

Bloch explained that the society's 20 apartments are used by seniors for an average of four months each on an emergency basis. The cost to house each senior is \$20 per day and more than 95 per cent of the society's 176 clients-to-date have found permanent housing by the end of their tenancy.

"The traditional shelter that you have in mind isn't the best fit for seniors," she said, adding that people who may be frail or experiencing health problems should not need to walk around the streets all day without a comfortable place to rest.

The temporary housing program, started in 2007, helps improve living conditions for a population that the United Way has estimated is the fastest growing homeless group in the Lower Mainland — one that has grown by more than 250 per cent in just six years. Almost one in four seniors in the area who are 65 or older live in poverty, according to the organization.

Bloch said the society has begun to look for partners who can replace the United Way funding, but said nothing promising has emerged.

"We have a pretty strong case here — a social case, a business case and we're confident something will come up," she said. "Our ultimate goal would be for the provincial government to step in."

The loss of Bloch's program is perhaps the most striking illustration of the way seniors will be affected by the difficult decision by the United Way to dam these funding streams.

Despite the terminations, McKnight said the United Way is "funding seniors organizations to a much greater extent than we ever have and to a greater extent than the services we are supporting for both children and families."

He said the United Way has expanded its Better at Home program, which is a partnership with the provincial government to provide non-medical home support for seniors living in their own homes, which is now available in 68 communities across the province.

Eric Kowalski, the executive director of the West End Senior Seniors' Network, said the cuts came as a complete surprise to him and other organizations around Greater Vancouver.

"None of us saw this coming — that there would be this level of reduction in funding for seniors services," he said.

Kowalski said his organization is among those that receive funding from the Better at Home program, but added that terminations like those of the United Way are only the "latest volley" in an unpredictable funding game that leaves seniors without long-term assurance that the programs and agencies they need will be there from year to year.

"We hear lots of talk about the grey tsunami, and yet when it comes to providing funding to support core early intervention services to assist seniors in isolation, to keep seniors connected, to keep them functioning in their communities, the funding's patchwork," he said. "It could be here today, gone tomorrow."

Kowalski added that his organization, like others in the field, would benefit from a more coordinated funding framework that would prevent gutting decisions like that made by the United Way from needing to happen.

"Why are we relying on private donations and campaigns to fund programs that the research would seem to suggest are not just important but critical?" Kowalski asked. "The seniors are going to lose out."

Among the other services set to be axed is Seniors No Longer Alone, a \$350,000 per year initiative that helps service providers "reach out to extremely isolated seniors in their own homes, supporting them to stay independent, active and connected," according to the United Way.

A 2011 seniors' vulnerability report by the organization found that seniors with small, unsupportive networks are at increased risk for poor physical and mental health.

The United Way also found in its 2011 report that highly vulnerable seniors — including women over 85, unattached, single-income seniors, visible minority and recent immigrant seniors, seniors with less formal education, and those with mobility limitations or chronic illnesses —

tend to be highly concentrated in certain neighbourhoods. These include areas like central Richmond, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, the Kingsway corridor in Burnaby, and the Newton area of Surrey, according to the United Way.

Seniors in areas like these are directly affected by the decision to end \$650,000 in funding for the seniors Active and Independent initiative, which aimed to build social connections for such residents.

Also chopped will be \$300,000 in annual funding for the Support to Caregivers program, which strengthens agencies that offer help to those who care for elders, and \$100,000 annually to the Seniors First program, designed to build "greater cohesion, coordination and capacity building with the highly fragmented seniors sector," according to the United Way.

Kowalski said the United Way is not to blame for the loss of funding, adding that reduced donations to the organization left it handcuffed.

McKnight said the agency raised about \$27 million in donations in its last campaign, which was down from about \$28 million the year before.

In 2009 the United Way raised \$30.6 million but the amount has declined steadily every year since.

"We are doing a reasonable job of balancing our ability to fund services at a time when philanthropic dollars are getting difficult to raise," McKnight said.

"There's never enough money to cover the need in a community and that's just reality.

Last year, the United Way reached 27,000 seniors with funds for home support services, and caregiver and outreach programs, according to its annual report.

gbellett@vancouver.sun.com

mrobinson@vancouver.sun.com