



Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health

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Creating Homes For All Creates Health For All

November 22 is National Housing Day in Canada, and many of us will be expecting the federal government to release its results of a nation-wide conversation called “Let’s Talk Housing” as a first step towards resurrecting a national housing strategy. Canada has been without a federal housing strategy since 1993 and we have all witnessed the hardship that has ensued. Currently in Peterborough, over 60 individuals are sheltered each night, the mere tip of a homeless iceberg. Wait lists continuing to grow for affordable housing, with almost 600 seniors on Peterborough’s list that as of October 31 now totals over 1,400.

Despite local successes like the newly renovated Mount Community Centre apartments, we need our federal government to re-invest in a national housing strategy as the very foundation for better health and quality of life for the 32% of our population that does not own a home. Add to that, the number of home owners on low or fixed incomes who cannot meet the demands of utility costs, property taxes or repairs and the issue mushrooms, especially in these economic times when employment and living wages can be elusive. Many households in Peterborough are spending more than 50% of their incomes on shelter costs, whether they own or rent.

Housing insecurity can have a deleterious impact on health. The World Health Organization has recognized adequate housing as a “fundamental condition and resource for health” in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986). Housing needs, then, must be addressed as one of the building blocks towards a healthier community for all. Permanent, safe, appropriate and affordable housing is key to a community that is strong and successful.

On October 27, the Peterborough Council on Aging in collaboration with many local partners hosted the 2016 Seniors’ Summit at Trent University. This year’s topic was *Designing Healthy Housing & Innovative Communities*. The City CAO, Allan Seabrooke and I emceed the day, where about 150 people, including researchers, housing developers, local seniors, community advocates, as well as municipal staff engaged in inspirational dialogue on the importance of housing affordability and accessibility for our vulnerable aging population. Throughout the day, we shared knowledge about what our aging population needs in order to live well, explored successful housing models, and discussed future opportunities. Some of the exciting innovative ideas presented as a way to address local housing issues included the concepts of “home share”, co-housing, and intergenerational living.

But let’s be clear: this is not just a “seniors” issue. Housing, and the design of our communities, affects all of us throughout the life cycle. Affordable, barrier-free homes and streets are just as important to

young families with a stroller, as they are to anyone using a mobility device. “Age-optimizing” neighbourhoods need to have services within reach and less car dependent; they need to be well connected socially, as well as through public transportation; and they must have enhanced snow removal and ice prevention to keep fragile bones from breaking.

Peterborough has a 10-year Housing and Homelessness Plan and we are well poised should the federal government re-emerge as a funding partner. Provincial funding has been well-utilized to help create new units that are more affordable to some, but not all. We have seen new supportive housing created for individuals who require assistance in maintaining their independence. The Brock Mission is undergoing redevelopment that will include 30 emergency shelter beds plus 15 single room occupancy units specifically for males transitioning out of homelessness. The City of Peterborough has a Community Improvement Plan with incentives for developers that may be tied to the creation of affordable units in the City.

It’s a crowded agenda, as it should be – the social and health cost of unmet housing needs is very high. We are fortunate to have so many committed partners in this community, and I hope that National Housing Day will herald a renewed federal role to help us meet both present and future needs so that we can literally build a better future that will include and support all of us.

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For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

<http://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/about-us/about-us-2/our-medical-officer-of-health/>