



HEALTH SUPPORTS FOR SHELTERS SERVING SENIORS NEEDS ASSESSMENT

GREATER VANCOUVER SHELTER STRATEGY
MARCH 2016

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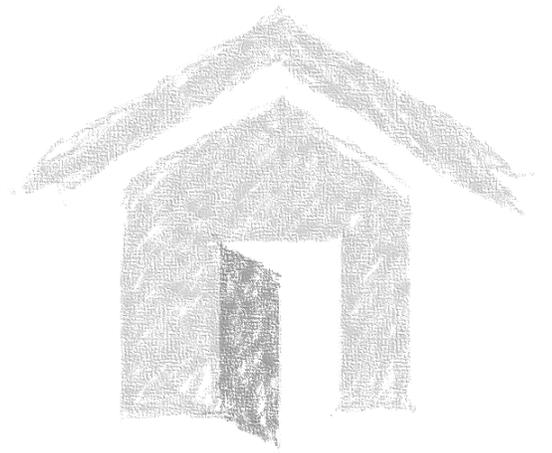


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Executive Summary

In the winter of 2014/15 the Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy (GVSS) conducted a series of interviews with shelter staff and residents to discuss ways in which shelters could enhance or improve their capacity to serve seniors. One of the issues that was commonly identified by shelter staff as impacting their ability to serve seniors was seniors' health needs. Shelters identified that these issues dramatically impacted their capacity to provide service. If a senior arrived at the shelter with one of those issues, the result may be that the senior was discharged from the shelter and referred elsewhere.

This circumstance is particularly concerning as it is recognized that seniors with challenging health issues are an even more vulnerable segment of an already vulnerable population. They are also some of those whom we would least like to see turned away from an emergency shelter; a service whose purpose it is to serve the most vulnerable. However, it is also recognized that the ability to address these issues does not typically lie within the capacity of the shelter staff and likely requires outside assistance from health supports.

A needs assessment was conducted to clearly identify the physical health issues that most impact a shelter's capacity to serve a senior and what types of support may be beneficial. A focus group with seniors residing in a shelter and online survey of shelter staff was conducted.

The responses of staff and seniors generally aligned with each other in identifying the supports that would be beneficial in managing seniors' health issues.

The health issues that most impacted a shelter's capacity to serve seniors were identified as follows:

- Need for support in caring for personal hygiene
- Inability to use toilet/shower independently
- Incontinence and bowel issues
- Lack of awareness or knowledge of own health issues
- Chronic pain issues
- High risk for heart attacks
- Dementia
- Confused outbursts that impact safety of individual/staff/clients
- Inability/challenge in travelling to appointments
- Inability to dress independently

It was identified that community nursing or home care support would be successful in addressing many of these issues. This support could relieve burden on hospital beds that may otherwise be used to accommodate seniors with these issues.

Recommendations to enhance the capacity of shelters to serve seniors who experienced health issues are:

1. When referring seniors with health issues that are consistently identified by shelters as causing challenges, consult with the shelter to ensure that sufficient additional assistance is arranged
2. Refer seniors with specific health issues to shelters that are known to be able to accommodate these issues
3. Provide shelters with access to community health support that allows them to better serve seniors with the most challenging health issues
4. Support shelters to build better connections with their local community health providers/clinics

Introduction

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy (GVSS) has delivered a Homeless Seniors Community of Practice (CoP) since 2012, in response to the increasing number of seniors that in shelters and outreach services across Metro Vancouver.

The CoP identifies seniors as those who are 50 years or older. This younger categorization recognizes that the experience of poverty and homelessness can substantially impact the experience of aging. Many homeless seniors experience the same health, mental health, job prospect and other challenges as those up to 15 years their senior.¹

Background

In December 2014 and January 2015 the Homeless Seniors Community of Practice conducted a series of surveys with seniors and staff in shelters. The focus of these surveys was to understand how to better survey vulnerable seniors in a residential setting (both housing and shelters). In the course of these surveys a number of issues came to light that did not directly relate to the focus of the current work but were important to understanding support for seniors.

One of these issues was the difficulty that some health issues present for shelters in accommodating seniors. Staff expressed that there were certain issues that often meant that they were not equipped to serve the senior and that sometimes this resulted in the senior being referred away from the shelter. At times, this can mean that a senior is bounced between shelter and hospital until an appropriate solution can be found; if one is available.

[Due to challenges in accommodating some health issues] ...some of the **most vulnerable seniors** are not able to be effectively served in the system that is typically expected to serve vulnerable persons.

This occurrence is particularly disturbing because it means that seniors with a higher level of need are not always able to be supported by the shelter. That is, some of the most vulnerable seniors are not able to be effectively served in the system that is typically expected to serve vulnerable persons. This situation is also frustrating for both shelters and hospitals who want to see the senior cared for, but have not found a solution.

In discussing this issue with Fraser Health, it was determined that some of the challenges that were experienced by the shelters might be able to be addressed with access to community health supports. It was agreed that a pilot could be conducted to examine how best to connect shelters with community health supports. Due to existing relationships and operational considerations, it was agreed that Hyland House would act as the pilot site for enhancing the supports that can be used to ensure seniors can access shelters. To ensure that there was full understanding of the problem at hand, GVSS conducted a needs assessment to clearly identify the issues to be addressed.

¹ Bottomley, M. (2001). Health care and homeless older adults. *Top Geriatric Rehabilitation Series*. 17(1), 1–21.; Thomas, B. (2011). *Homelessness: A silent killer*. University of Sheffield.; Waldbrook, N. A. (2013). *Homelessness, Stable Housing, and Opportunities for Healthy Aging: Exploring the Relationships*. Queen's University.

Research Methodology

A focus group was conducted with seniors (4 males, 1 female) at Hyland House. Key questions included their journey to the shelter, any medical conditions that they need help with, whether shelter staff are able to help them with those needs, if there was anything with which staff were not able to help, and what supports they thought would be helpful for them or other seniors in the shelter.

A web-based survey was distributed to members of GVSS and the Homeless Seniors Community of Practice, inviting shelter staff to complete the survey. The survey informed respondents about the definition of seniors (50 years and older) and also stated that the focus of the survey is physical health concerns rather than mental health concerns.

Staff Survey	
1. Based on your recollection of the past year, please indicate how commonly your shelter was asked to serve a senior with the following health care needs. (Not very common, Somewhat common, Very common)	
Cancer	Inability/challenge in travelling to appointments
Chronic pain issues	Incontinence and bowel issues
Confused outbursts that impact safety of individual/staff/clients	Lack of awareness or knowledge of own health issues
COPD	Need for support in caring for personal hygiene
Dementia	Need for support with medications management
Diabetes	Need for support with wound care
Hepatitis C	Need for translation services when dealing with medical issues
High risk for heart attacks	Storage of oxygen tanks
Inability to dress independently	Unique nutritional needs due to health issues
Inability to get out of bed independently	Unsafe wandering / or leaving the shelter
Inability to open/navigate doors independently	Wheelchair use
2. If you have any comments that would be helpful in clarifying your above responses, please include them here.	
3. Are there any common health issues that seniors in your shelter experience that we have not included? Please list them below.	

Staff Survey (cont.)

4. Which of the following issues are likely to impact your ability to serve a senior? (Can always accommodate, Not very likely to cause challenges, Somewhat likely to cause challenges, Very likely to cause challenges, Unable to support/requires referral elsewhere)
- | | |
|---|--|
| Cancer | Inability/challenge in travelling to appointments |
| Chronic pain issues | Incontinence and bowel issues |
| Confused outbursts that impact safety of individual/staff/clients | Lack of awareness or knowledge of own health issues |
| COPD | Need for support in caring for personal hygiene |
| Dementia | Need for support with medications management |
| Diabetes | Need for support with wound care |
| Hepatitis C | Need for translation services when dealing with medical issues |
| High risk for heart attacks | Storage of oxygen tanks |
| Inability to dress independently | Unique nutritional needs due to health issues |
| Inability to get out of bed independently | Unsafe wandering / or leaving the shelter |
| Inability to open/navigate doors independently | Wheelchair use |
5. Do any of the extra health issues you listed in Q3 impact your shelter's ability to serve seniors with these issues? Please provide details below.
6. If you were able to access health supports in your shelter, what types of support would be most helpful in increasing your ability to serve seniors?
7. Does your shelter have any resources that help you successfully support seniors with their health care needs? If so, please describe them.

Results

Seniors

Personal Circumstances

The seniors were asked to provide some information about what had led them to the shelter. **For almost all who were interviewed, they indicated that this was their first time being in a shelter.** Some had been housed prior to coming to the shelter and fell behind on rent, which resulted in an eviction. For others, a stay in the hospital due to health issues preceded their arrival at the shelter.

Benefits of the Shelter

One of the seniors interviewed said that there were at least two seniors, himself and another resident, were residing in the shelter with serious, chronic health issues, such as cancer. These seniors had resided in the shelter for an incredibly long time; more than 2 years for one of them. One individual said that they stayed because without the shelter they would have no where else to go that could provide them with the level of care that they needed.

“If it wasn’t for these guys, helping me out, giving me a place, you know, taking care of me, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Some of the benefits that the shelter provided included:

- Staff available 24/7 in case something goes wrong – “They can check on you”
- Assistance with managing food and meal requirements
- The ability to stay in bed all day if needed
- Access to individual rooms

Common Health Issues

The common health issues of those staying in the shelter, as identified by the group, were:

- People taking large amounts of medication (pills)
- Many people using walkers
- Hepatitis C
- Cancer
- Vision and hearing loss problems
- People older than you would have imagined in a shelter – “One lady here is 75 years old”

It is recognized that it is likely that seniors underestimated the frequency of some health issues. It is expected that seniors would underestimate the frequency of any issue that a shelter was regularly unable to accommodate. As a result, it is expected that some information on health issues would be missing for seniors.

Recommended Supports

The staffing role that was recommended by the seniors was a nurse who would visit the shelter at least weekly. It was felt that the nurse would be able to assist in two key ways

- 1) Provide assistance with medications management
- 2) Provide education and support regarding common seniors’ health issues

It is noted that for all of the seniors who indicated the benefit of medications management, none of them indicated that they felt that they personally would benefit from this support, but they felt that there were others in the shelter who could benefit.

Seniors recommended health education and support because it was felt that some may not be aware of all of their health issues. Seniors identified that support such as general check-ups, information sessions on managing common health issues and regular visits that could identify health deterioration, would be beneficial. Seniors agreed that this type of support could be provided through weekly nursing visits. It was felt that this monitoring could prevent health deteriorating to a point where an individual must be taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

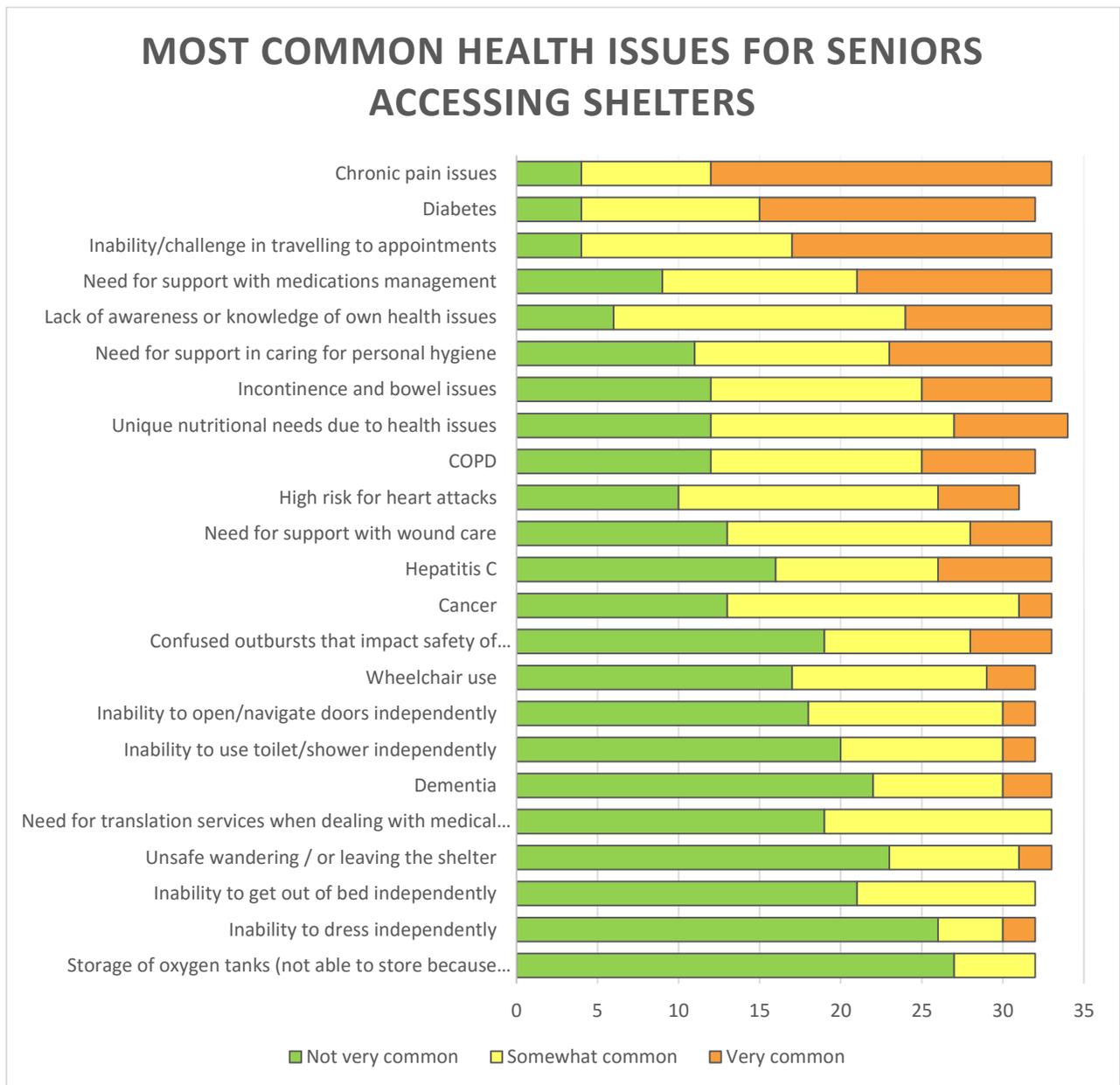
Staff

Question 1

Staff were asked about the common health issues of seniors that they served. They were prompted to include all instances in which they were asked to serve a senior in the past year, regardless of whether that senior had actually stayed at the shelter. This question provided a baseline estimate of the frequency of the health issues that shelters face without underestimating certain issues because the shelter was unable to accommodate them.

Results were coded to assist in later analysis such that ‘Not very common’ = 1, ‘Somewhat common’ = 2, ‘Very common’ = 3. Based on this coding, the most common seniors’ health issues that are encountered at shelters in Metro Vancouver are:

- Chronic pain issues
- Diabetes
- Inability/challenge in travelling to appointments
- Need for support in medications management
- Lack of awareness or knowledge of own health issues
- Need for support in caring for personal hygiene



Question 2

When asked if there was any additional information that would help clarify the responses that were given in the first question, the general theme that emerged suggested that seniors' health issues are often complex and/or challenging for the senior to understand or manage. It was also noted that at times seniors did not disclose their health issues and so this information may not be known by staff.

Question 3

Other physical health issues that were noted that were not included in the list in Question 1 were:

- Podiatry and foot care
- Lack of access to a family doctor
- Lack of eye glasses
- Weak immune system
- Functional illiteracy
- Addictions

Question 4

Staff were also asked to assess how challenging it was for their shelter to accommodate seniors' health issues.

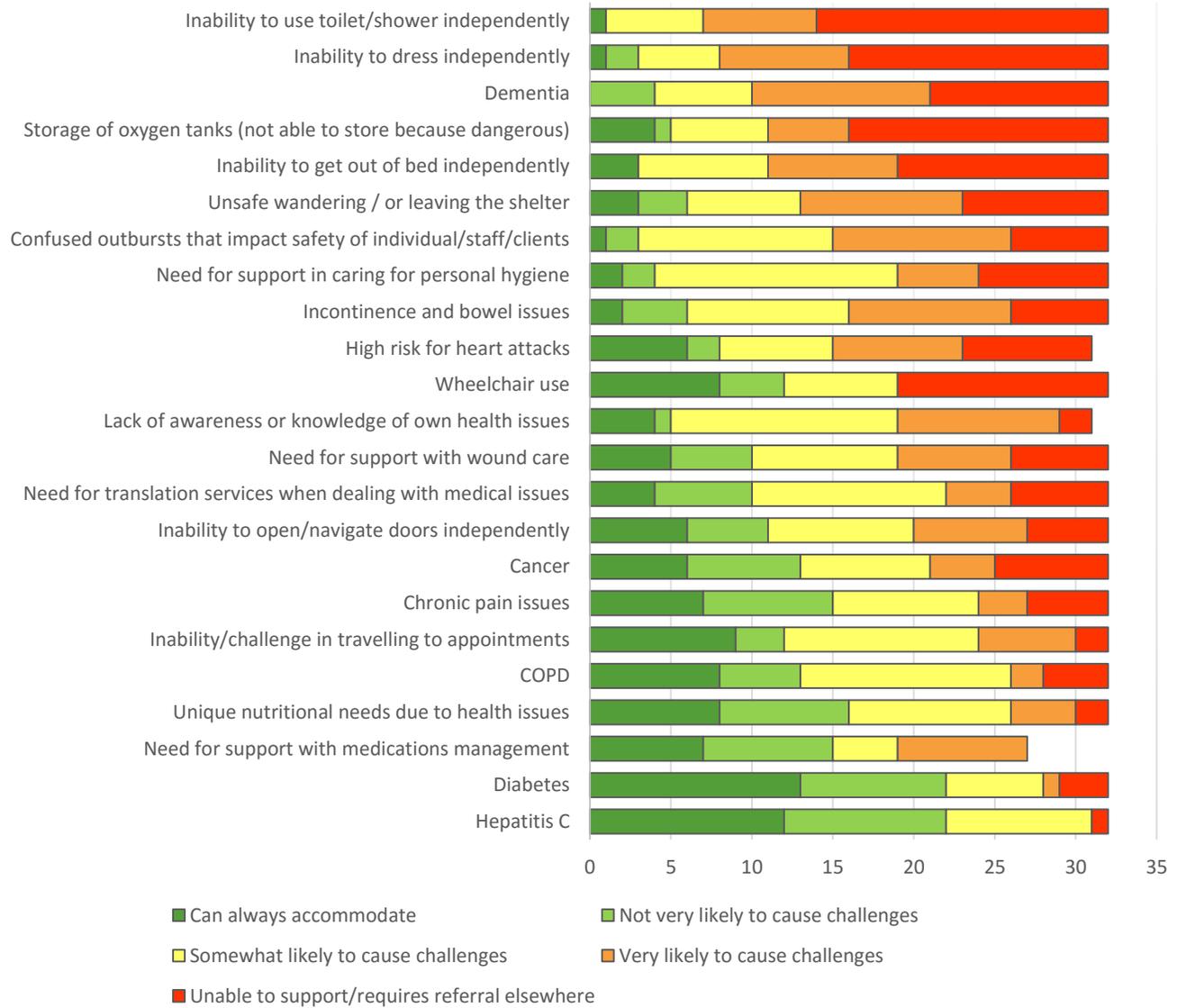
Results were coded such that 'Can always accommodate' = 0, 'Not very likely to cause challenges' = 1, 'Somewhat likely to cause challenges' = 2, 'Very likely to cause challenges' = 3 and 'Unable to accommodate/requires referral elsewhere' = 4.

Based on this coding, the seniors' health issues that are most difficult for shelters in Metro Vancouver to accommodate are:

- Inability to use toilet/shower independently
- Inability to dress independently
- Dementia
- Storage of oxygen tanks
- Inability to get out of bed independently
- Unsafe wandering / or leaving the shelter

Shelters showed greater variability in their capacity to manage various health issues compared to their assessment of the frequency of these issues. Responses indicate that there are both health issues that most shelters are able to accommodate that some cannot, while there are also health issues that many shelters struggle to deal with using their current capacity, while others indicate no challenge at all.

DIFFICULTY IN MANAGING SENIORS' HEALTH ISSUES



Issues Causing Greatest Challenge

The independent assessment of the commonality and difficulty in managing of seniors’ health issues provides the ability to combine the results to identify the most challenging health issues for shelters in serving seniors. If supports are targeted to the combined ‘most common, most difficult’ issues then targeting support to address this issue will likely increase shelters’ capacity to serve a broader scope of seniors.

The responses of Q1 (frequency score) and Q4 (difficulty score) were combined by averaging the responses for each item and then multiplying these figures for each health issue (impact score). As a result of these calculations, the issues that are suggested as the best to target to enhance shelters’ capacity to serve seniors are:

- Need for support in caring for personal hygiene
- Inability to use toilet/shower independently
- Incontinence and bowel issues
- Lack of awareness or knowledge of own health issues
- Chronic pain issues
- High risk for heart attacks
- Dementia
- Confused outbursts that impact safety of individual/staff/clients
- Inability/challenge in travelling to appointments
- Inability to dress independently

Health Issue	Frequency Score	Difficulty Score	Impact Score
Need for support in caring for personal hygiene	1.97	2.47	4.86
Inability to use toilet/shower independently	1.44	3.28	4.72
Incontinence and bowel issues	1.88	2.44	4.58
Lack of awareness or knowledge of own health issues	2.09	2.16	4.52
Chronic pain issues	2.52	1.72	4.32
High risk for heart attacks	1.84	2.32	4.27
Dementia	1.42	2.91	4.14
Confused outbursts that impact safety of individual/staff/clients	1.58	2.59	4.09
Inability/challenge in travelling to appointments	2.36	1.66	3.91
Inability to dress independently	1.25	3.13	3.91
Inability to get out of bed independently	1.34	2.88	3.86
Need for support with wound care	1.76	2.13	3.73
Unsafe wandering / or leaving the shelter	1.36	2.59	3.54
Wheelchair use	1.56	2.19	3.42
Storage of oxygen tanks (not able to store because dangerous)	1.16	2.88	3.32
Cancer	1.67	1.97	3.28
Need for support with medications management	2.09	1.48	3.10
COPD	1.84	1.66	3.05
Inability to open/navigate doors independently	1.50	2.00	3.00
Need for translation services when dealing with medical issues	1.42	2.06	2.94
Unique nutritional needs due to health issues	1.85	1.50	2.78
Diabetes	2.41	1.13	2.71
Hepatitis C	1.73	1.00	1.73

Question 5

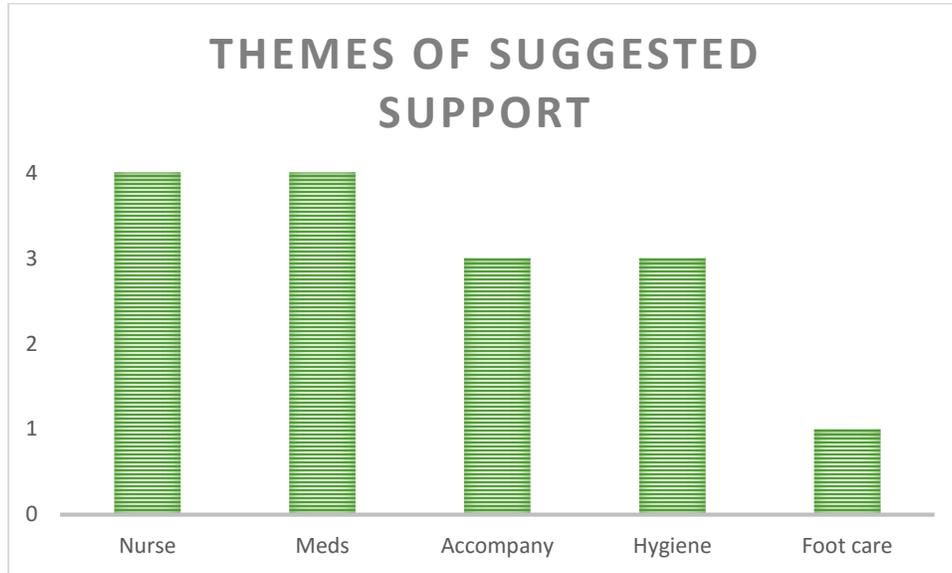
Staff were asked whether any of the additional health issues that they listed in Question 3 also impacted their ability to accommodate seniors. Podiatry and foot care were listed as issues that could impact a shelter's ability to accommodate a senior.

While not mentioned in Question 3, it was also noted that a senior's health issues can compound with addictions issues when the senior realizes that they must reduce their substance use behaviours to better manage their health issues. The shelter environment can be triggering for use and therefore increase the difficulty for the senior in managing their health issues.

It was also noted that management of any health issues for seniors and the case management process often takes longer than a younger person; the additional time is necessary to ensure that the senior has the structure and support that they need.

Question 6

Staff were asked about the type of supports would enhance their capacity to support seniors. While the answers were open response, they were analyzed for themes of commonality. The emerging themes centred around desire for nursing support, support discussing and administering medication, accompaniment to appointments, support in addressing hygiene issues and foot care.



These suggestions for support generally affirm the analysis that determined the health issues that are most challenging for shelters to manage. Many supports that were suggested by staff have the potential to address the issues that were identified as most challenging.

Suggested Support	Health Issue
Medications	Chronic pain issues
Nurse/ Home Care	Dementia
	Lack of awareness or knowledge of own health issues
	Inability to dress independently
Hygiene	High risk for heart attacks
	Need for support in caring for personal hygiene
	Incontinence and bowel issues
Accompaniment	Inability to use toilet/shower independently
	Inability/challenge in travelling to appointments
Other	Confused outbursts that impact safety of individual/staff/clients

The only suggest area of support that does not seem to align with the analysis of challenging issues is support with medications. While the majority of respondents identified it as a common issue that seniors manage, they also generally identified managing medications as not difficult to manage. However, medications

management was also an issue that seniors identified as helpful. In fact, it is noted that both staff and seniors generally agreed on the types of support that would be helpful.

Question 7

Shelters were also asked what types of assistance they currently have to be able to support seniors. Respondents typically identified relationships or partnerships with community clinics or community nurses as the type of support they receive. Assistance or training provided by Senior Services Society was also identified.

Recommendations

Provide Support for Consistently Challenging Issues

While variation was found in the types of issues that were difficult for shelters to manage, the top five issues were identified as causing challenges by at least 50% of the respondents. These issues were:

- Inability to use toilet/shower independently
- Inability to dress independently
- Dementia
- Storage of oxygen tanks
- Inability to get out of bed independently

Therefore, if a senior experiencing one of these issues is referred to the shelter, there is a high likelihood that the shelter may refuse service. If a senior arrives from a hospital at the shelter and it is discovered that they experience one of these issues, it also increases the likelihood that the senior may be ‘bounced back’ to the hospital.

If a hospital, or other referring agency, is attempting to utilize a shelter to accommodate a senior with one of these issues, then it is recommended that they arrange for appropriate support that will alleviate the burden on the shelter staff, preferably prior to the arrival of the senior at the shelter.

Confirm Which Shelters Can Support the Senior

The variability in the capacity of shelters to accommodate other seniors’ health issues suggests that there is benefit in determining which shelter can best assist a senior before they are referred. While the closest shelter may not be able to accommodate a particular health issue, it is possible that another shelter in Metro Vancouver is able to serve the senior.

Rather than expecting hospital staff to call around to each shelter to discover which shelter can accommodate the senior, it may be helpful to create some kind of centralized resource that hospital staff could use to aid in their referral of seniors to shelters.

One of the issues that would need to be considered when providing service to seniors is the balance between finding a shelter that can easily accommodate all of their issues, and ensuring that the senior is able to stay in a shelter environment and community that they personally identify as meeting their needs.

Provide Support that Addresses Most Challenging Issues

If the capacity of emergency shelters to serve seniors is to be enhanced, it is suggested that the most effective way to do so is to target those issues that provide the greatest challenge to the shelters. By combining the frequency of common seniors' health issues and the level of difficulty to the create for shelters to serve the senior, the needs assessment identified the top ten health issues for which support would enhance the capacity of the shelter to serve seniors.

It is suggested that support from a community nurse or care aide would provide effective support for almost all issues that shelters find challenging. The most consistent need for support is in managing hygiene needs; the top three most challenging health issues related to hygiene support. Such support would appear to have a high likelihood of enhancing shelters capacity to serve seniors and potentially reducing the burden on hospital beds that may otherwise have to accommodate them.

The areas in which community nursing or home care support may improve the capacity of shelters to accommodate seniors are as follows:

Hygiene Support

- Need for support in caring for personal hygiene (1*)
- Inability to use toilet/shower independently (2)
- Incontinence and bowel issues (3)

Health Education

- Lack of awareness or knowledge of own health issues (4)
- Chronic pain issues (5)
- High risk for heart attacks (6)
- Dementia (7)

Medications Management

- Chronic pain issues (5)
- High risk for heart attacks (6)
- Dementia (7)

Mobility Assistance

- Inability to dress independently (10)

*Indicates the ranking of the issue in its impact on shelter capacity to serve seniors

There is only one issue that may not be within the capacity of nurses and/or home health to support seniors. These is, "Inability/challenge to travel to appointments" (9). However, it may be possible that nursing or care aide assistance could provide indirect assistance with these issues by reducing the number of health appointments that a senior needs to make.

It is further noted that if regular nursing and/or home care support was available to shelters, some of the other health issues that cause challenge for shelters to accommodate, but were not found in the top ten, could also be supported. These issues include, “Inability to get out of bed independently” (11), “Need for support with wound care” (12), and “Need for support with medications management” (17).

Assist in Building Partnerships

Shelters who do have access to support for seniors’ health issues consistently do so by having arrangements with local health providers or clinics. Resources that may be helpful in helping shelters build these relationships could include

- Information pamphlets/handouts that help communicate to health clinics regarding the types of support that the shelter needs
- Guidelines or recommendations to shelters on steps that are likely to lead to success in building relationships with local health clinics
- Regional support in developing consistent relationships with community health providers