

# July 20, Cranbrook, British Columbia

## Summary of Presentations

*Council received the following information with great interest. As Council begins to develop recommendations for its final report it will integrate information from the July 20 briefings with additional input from the public and with background readings and research on the various topics.*

*The information presented in this summary reflects the variety of opinions presented to Council at the Cranbrook meeting, and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Government of British Columbia or the Premier's Council on Aging and Seniors' Issues.*

During their July 20 session in Cranbrook, Council members were informed by a series of briefings that examined some of the broad challenges faced by older adults living in rural communities, and some of the unique challenges faced by these communities in providing services to older adults. Throughout the day, a series of involved community members, researchers, service providers and other panellists explored these challenges and outlined community responses in four panels:

- Seniors in Rural BC – Provincial Perspectives & Approaches
- Community Perspectives & Needs
- Community Approaches & Solutions
- Research Perspectives & Approaches

### **Seniors in Rural BC – Provincial Perspectives & Approaches**

Council heard two presentations that brought a province-wide perspective to challenges faced by rural communities, and the role of information sharing and networking in meeting these challenges.

Presenters were:

- **Sue Clark**, Program Officer, [Union of British Columbia Municipalities](#)
- **Maureen LeBourdais**, Coordinator, [BC Rural Network](#)

Sue Clark said the Union of BC Municipalities defines “senior” by need for services and “rural” by the degree of isolation.

- The aging of the population is accelerated in many [interior] BC rural communities by a combination of young people leaving for economic reasons and retired people staying because moving to the coast is no longer affordable.
- Seniors in rural areas have less access to assisted living – and this creates a need for more services in the community to support independence and avoid the need to move away.
- The UBCM has received \$2 million over the past three years from the province for its [Seniors Housing and Support Services Initiative](#).
- Several communities are undertaking pilot projects with funding from this program, including rural communities such as McBride, Sparwood and Creston.

Maureen LeBourdais described the non-profit BC Rural Network as a “network of networks” that enables those working with seniors in rural BC to communicate with each other and share information through a series of summits, forums and “rural dialogues.”

Some of the issues addressed by members of the network are the same as in urban BC; others are uniquely rural:

- Out-migration of young people (depleting the labour pool available for services to seniors).
- Transportation in communities without infrastructure.
- Cultural differences between newly arrived retirees from the city and long-time local residents.

During the ensuing discussion about provincial perspectives and approaches, the following observations were made:

- In response to questions from meeting guests and Council members, Sue Clark provided additional details about UBCM “seniors and communities” projects, and noted that additional details are posted on the web site.
- There is a need for a central source of information for rural communities, or even a collection of web links at one place. The compilation of information in one location is essential.
- Some older people get information about support services that are available from their health authority, but others – who are not referred by their doctors – get no information at all.
- Information about local community services is only valuable if services are actually in place.
- A “digital divide” currently exists between communities with broadband and those without.
- The downloading of service delivery to the volunteer sector will run into problems, as the volunteers get older.

## Community Perspectives & Needs

The Council then heard three presentations examining the needs of older rural residents from a variety of perspectives. Presenters were asked to identify some of the key challenges faced by older adults in different rural areas of the province, and to suggest options for enabling older people in these areas to remain engaged in their communities. Presenters included:

- **Councillor Lynne Christiansen**, [City of Terrace](#)
- **Robert Jackson**, Past President, Castlegar and District Health Watch
- **Susan Michaud**, South Peace Senior’s Access Services Society

Lynne Christiansen described Terrace as a huge, spread-out community with an aging population and few services for seniors – a situation that makes seniors’ needs increasingly urgent. UNBC did a study of these needs in Terrace, and found:

- Older residents in Terrace like the small community.
- Concern about lack of sidewalks, lack of handrails, lack of transit (HandyDART hours), distances travelled for [medical] appointments.
- The absence of comprehensive home-support services or assisted-living creates strong demand for complex care.
- This creates a shortage of complex-care beds – currently with a two-year waiting list.
- The consequence of the waiting list is people “parked” in acute care who do not need that level of care, or people left in their homes without adequate services to ensure their safety and comfort.
- The study concluded that the community needed more assisted-living housing and an expanded range of home care services to take pressure off complex care beds.

Robert Jackson pointed out that seniors in rural areas of BC face barriers that diminish their access to services – barriers unlike those faced by urban dwellers. These rural barriers include distance, travel times and the cost of travel. All of this forces many older, rural British Columbians to uproot themselves as they age and move to communities where the necessary services are more accessible.

He presented the council with several recommendations:

- He urged the provincial government to move beyond statistical averages and “humanize” health planning and policies in rural British Columbia – particularly where this enables older people to remain in their own communities when they need assisted care or complex care.
- He urged the provincial government to put more resources into rural transportation systems.
- He suggested that businesses take a lead in developing volunteer-based assistance for seniors.

Susan Michaud said that older people living in different rural communities have common needs: limited access to services (especially with winter roads) and seniors’ health affected by a lifetime of hard physical labour.

She illustrated the shortcomings in rural services for older people in Dawson Creek and the surrounding area:

- Home support and home care do not exist in outlying rural areas beyond 30 kilometres from Dawson Creek – except from volunteers.
- Fifty people in Dawson Creek are waiting for home care; many wait for assisted living – with no alternatives.
- Housing available for low-income seniors is often substandard.
- Unpaid farm wives do not build up entitlement to CPP.
- Older people in outlying areas are told to move into Dawson Creek in order to access services, but cannot afford to do so.

In spite of these obstacles, community groups in the Dawson Creek region are innovating. The South Peace Senior's Access Services Society has set up a program where young people assist older neighbours in exchange for mentorship.

During the ensuing discussion about community perspectives and needs, the following observations were made:

- Community-based programs for older residents are often underfunded, and often lack the kinds of skills and the people needed to secure funding.
- Many people living in local communities believe there is a gap between the official statistics on waiting lists for care beds and the grassroots reality.
- Many older British Columbians have a low income and cannot afford private-care services.
- Some smaller communities work closely with seniors to enable them to remain in their homes. In one BC rural community, cited as an example, the local steelworkers union helps repair and maintain seniors' homes, and high school students assist seniors as part of their school volunteer-hours requirement.

## Community Approaches & Solutions

The Council then heard three presentations that explored various approaches and solutions for meeting the needs of older people living in rural BC communities. The presenters had been asked to share examples to illustrate how government and other partners address future challenges facing older people in rural areas. They were also asked to examine how to get information about services out to rural seniors and how community organizations can better serve older people by facilitating partnerships.

Presenters were:

- **Louise Stropky**, President, East Kootenay Senior Caregiver's Network
- **Roz MacKinnon**, Upper Island Geriatric Outreach Program
- **Jack Keough**, Executive Director, [Yellowhead Community Services](#)

Louise Stropky described the work of the East Kootenay Senior Caregiver's Network – a non-profit organization with a mandate to provide support to unpaid caregivers (mostly family members). The organization operates on the belief that well-informed and well-supported caregivers are more likely to stay healthy and keep on providing care longer, which in turn keeps the care-receiver in the home longer and may delay or even avoid the need for institutional care.

Some of the specific services and programs the Network offers caregivers include:

- Professional training delivered by paid facilitators and co-ordinated by a full-time paid organizer.
- Information and support – including a toll-free telephone number.
- Group meetings in local communities and a "buddy system" organized by the network.
- A quarterly newsletter – printed and circulated to 1,500 readers.
- The Network promotes self-care and the need for respite – helping caregivers deal with and overcome the guilt often associated with taking a break from caring for a loved one.

Roz MacKinnon then described the work of the Upper Island Geriatric Outreach Program. This program gets an interdisciplinary psychiatric outpatient team out of a regional hospital and into the rural communities of northern Vancouver Island.

The program provides “secondary services” to 2,200 older patients suffering from disorders such as dementia, delirium and other complex mental-health conditions. Secondary services fill a gap by supporting the family physicians who provide primary care, by educating patients and family caregivers, and by working at the community level to identify service needs and help build local capacity to meet those needs.

Current funding models do not cover many of these services, and do not cover much of the travel-time and travel costs. *The doctors on the outreach team actually donate some of their time as volunteers.* Roz MacKinnon suggested several innovations, including:

- More “travelling multi-disciplinary clinics” in rural areas, and easier referrals to services.
- Innovative use of care beds by “bed-sharing” so that two individuals use the same bed in turns – three nights in, three nights out.
- “Night respite” – where families drop off patients for the night, take them home during the day.
- Self-help social and recreational groups for older people – like the group in Gold River.
- More peer counselling.
- Tax credits for volunteerism and paid coordination to hold together volunteer-delivered services.

Jack Keough focussed his presentation on the process of bringing about change to community services and the need to develop creative solutions. He used the successful grassroots campaign to create UNBC as an example to illustrate the need to build support in local communities before approaching decision makers.

A similar example was a campaign to get BC Transit to create a local bus service: the community started a pilot-project bus service (at a loss) and then held a referendum (showing strong support) before approaching Transit.

Rural communities must overcome economies-of-scale issues when planning community services or seeking funding. This requires creative thinking – illustrated by several ideas:

- One person may serve several functions in the same community, combining job descriptions that – in urban areas – are separate positions and separate people.
- Services that would be separated and specialized in an urban area can be combined in smaller towns – for example, a rural assisted living facility could service older people, people with brain injuries and the developmentally disabled – thus enabling all three groups to live in their own rural community while still getting the services they need.
- Travelling services.
- “Piggyback services” – look for an existing community service to deliver a new service, even if the result looks different from the way things are done elsewhere. This can be done with local transportation as well as human services.

Jack Keough also recommended that local governments who establish social planning committees as standing committees should have access to grant funding. He said this would create an ongoing municipal interest in seniors’ issues.

During the ensuing discussion about community approaches and solutions, the following observations were made:

- Government programs will not pay a family caregiver if they live under the same roof. This is an issue in isolated rural locations where it may be difficult to recruit qualified caregivers from a tight labour force.
- Women in particular pay a tremendous economic price – present and future – when required to leave the labour force to care for an elderly family member.

- Meeting participants described a “chicken and egg” situation where it is difficult to get funding for startup community agencies without the focussed efforts and skills of at least one staff person; but there is no money to hire a staff person until funding is already in place.

## Research Perspectives & Approaches

The day closed with a presentation about current research on aging in rural areas. The presenter was asked to comment on the effect of location on quality-of-life, and on which current research is useful to rural communities engaged in planning for an aging population.

This presentation was delivered by **Dawn Hemingway**, Chair and Assistant Professor, [UNBC Social Work Program](#); and Co-Leader of the [BC Network for Aging Research](#). This Network links academic researchers, government, and non-profit organizations across BC to maximize the usefulness of research about aging and to enable people to build on that research.

Dawn Hemingway noted that the demographics of Northern BC are changing – as older adults increasingly elect to stay in the region as they age. She then cited some highlights from research:

- Most older people living in northern communities do not want to move away as they age.
- One third of older northerners said they would need changes in their housing in the next ten years to accommodate aging – affordable, appropriate housing is needed.
- Many people said they would need flexible services to enable them to stay in their homes.
- Many older northerners said they wanted a single source for reliable information on services and Demand for the seniors'-information service in Prince George is increasing.
- Low-income older couples often have financial problems when one partner moves to a facility and the other remains in the community – the lack of remaining income can require an “involuntary separation” in order for the remaining spouse to become eligible for GIS. They may also apply for a rate reduction at the care facility so they can continue to live in their own home.
- Domestic violence does not disappear from families as people age.

Dawn Hemingway made several recommendations to Council during her presentation:

- Avoid characterizing aging as a “problem” by focussing only on the difficulties – often a few simple, basic supports enable older people to live fully.
- Society must do a better job of capturing and mobilizing the skills of older people (and *not just as volunteers*).
- Funding for research and services must take into account rural realities such as weather and transportation costs.
- Research projects must gather data in smaller communities to make fully informed decisions about funding.
- Community agencies need base funding so volunteer time is not sucked up by preparing many grant applications to keep the organization going.
- People in urban centres could learn from the creativity of rural British Columbians.

During the ensuing discussion about the presentation on research perspectives and approaches, the following observations were made:

- [BC Rural Network web site](#) already provides info on possible funding sources for rural communities.
- There is a link between abuse of women and subsequent health problems.
- In 2003, the poverty rate of unattached women over age 65 in Canada was 18.9%, whereas the overall rate for the population the same age was 10.3%.
- The next generation of older British Columbians will be different from the current generation, because more women will have worked [and built eligibility for pensions], and will be better educated.
- As an example of creative thinking about community services, volunteers in Nelson use HandyDART buses during the midday “downtime” to deliver seniors and their groceries from the store to home.