
LIFE

New strategy links housing and health



By Carol Mulligan, Sudbury Star
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The North East Local Health Integration Network has launched a health and housing strategy for the next three years, recognizing that, if people don't have a decent place to live, their health will suffer.

Housing is one of the determinants of health -- a range of personal, social, economic and environmental factors that influence the health status of citizens.

"If you don't have a place to live, or if you don't have adequate housing, or if you're in substandard housing or if your housing costs so much you can't eat properly or pay the bills ... it will have an impact on your health," said Mike O'Shea, senior officer of mental health, addictions and housing for the North East LHIN.

Until the LHIN strategy was released this month, several different constituents were looking at housing, said O'Shea. Private, provincial, health and social service organizations were all "doing their own thing," working effectively together in some instances and in some cases not.

But there was no pivotal point where health and social agencies and the private sector could come together to discuss broad-based housing issues as they relate to several groups, including the frail elderly.

An expert panel of representatives from district social services administration boards, the Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association, the Canadian Mental Health Associations and other groups produced the strategy.

The North East LHIN, one of 14 planning, co-ordinating and funding agencies within the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, does not provide funding for housing per se, said O'Shea. It does, however, fund support programs such as personal support workers and others who provide services to help people live in their homes as long as possible.

A real challenge in housing for the frail elderly occurs in remote and rural areas, where there are not many options. "How do we find something for them? How do we support them in their homes?" asked O'Shea.

In some communities, hubs have been established in housing projects from which a variety of services is offered.

The strategy, called Innovative Housing with Health Supports in Northeastern Ontario Strategic Plan: 2016-2019, is now being "pushed out to all partners in the Northeast who are involved in housing projects for vulnerable people.

"Now the opportunity is for all of the partners to get into the document, take a look at what components speak specifically to them and the work they do, and then act on them," said O'Shea.

The LHIN put together by the LHIN will continue to work at setting priorities that could be acted upon.

With the population of northeastern Ontario rapidly aging, it's "next to impossible" to implement new housing projects quickly enough, said O'Shea.

Involving as many partners as possible, some with unique housing ideas, will produce small successes rather than trying to implement "huge nothings," he said.

Chris Stewart, executive co-ordinator of the Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association, said there's an urgent need to create new housing models and opportunities in the North because of the shortage of appropriate and affordable housing stock. The population of seniors and persons with low income is higher in the northeast than the provincial average, said Stewart.

The strategy contains a number of objectives that "cascade" from overarching themes such as clients and people, innovative housing and infrastructure, innovative health/social support provision and innovative leadership and sponsorships.

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Health and Housing

The North East LHIN sponsored a forum called "Building for the Future" in October 2015. From that forum came a request for the LHIN to do additional work on housing and health.

The LHIN struck the North East LHIN Expert Panel on Housing comprised of francophone and First Nations people, urban and rural communities, as well as those working in the housing, health care, private, public and economic development sectors.

The expert panel held a second housing forum in June, attended by more than 100 people, where a draft plan was discussed and then circulated for comment and feedback.

The North East LHIN board of directors received the final version of the housing strategy earlier this month.

To read the strategy, go to <http://www.nelhin.on.ca/>.

