

Seniors housing needs to move away from long-term care "default": CHATS

It is time for long-term care to be reconsidered as the default housing for the elderly, according to Christina Bisanz, CEO of CHATS.

Ms. Bisanz, head of CHATS ? Community and Home Assistance for Seniors, which serves York Region and South Simcoe, pressed Federal Minister of Seniors Deb Schulte for an increased emphasis on measures for aging in place during a virtual roundtable hosted by Newmarket-Aurora MP Tony Van Bynen late last month.

?When will we be able to stop looking at long-term care institutions as the de facto default for the elderly and housing for the elderly?? asked Ms. Bisanz, looking for any opportunities the Federal Government and Ms. Schulte's Ministry might have to make it happen.

These opportunities, said Ms. Bisanz, could include working with developers to provide incentives for varying housing models ?that truly enable people to age in place, to age in their own homes, with appropriate community support.?

?That would be if they do need additional personal support in the home, community supports to help them get around, but moving away from just building more and more beds to encouraging the building of homes that will support people to age in place.?

There is a move forwards housing for seniors with complex needs and lots of support though long-term care, said the Minister, but other countries are following a different path.

Ms. Schulte said recent conversations with Ontario's Ministers of Long-Term Care and Seniors helped underscore this point.

?I said I am bit concerned about the money that we're bringing to the table to help through the National Housing Strategy and also the Rapid Housing Strategy that we have brought, which seems to be pushing such urgency and the model seems to be pushing towards these 100-bed facilities,? said Minister Schulte. ?That isn't what seniors want to live in. How do we make sure that in our rush to accommodate the need we're not creating the environment that people don't want to be in.

?There are other models. In our National Housing Strategy, it is the first time that we looked at long-term care, not just in a health mode, because it was always deemed from a Federal perspective that this is a health issue, not a housing issue. It is a continuum of housing and we need to think of it that way.

?The challenge is it is complicated because we have to do it in conjunction with the Provinces and territories because they fund the health care portion. There is a housing portion, so how do we work that combination? We're still trying to work that out. We have money at the table, not only the 7,000 seniors' residences that we want to build or encourage to be built? in communities; We want to make sure we're encouraging the opportunity to support long-term care as well and assist those being done.?

There are ?really great, creative ideas? that are coming up from community organizations and non-profits, the Minister noted, adding that if any of these are ultimately borne to fruition that it will only be done with partners.

?We need to get cooperation from the Provinces to be able to do a different model and my understanding is they are supportive. It just has to make sense, economically, that it can be done. It is a call to the community. If we want to see different kind of housing built, let's work together to do that.?

Long-term care wasn't the only issue brought to the table during the virtual discussion.

Dr. Dave LeGallais, President of the Aurora Seniors' Association (ASA), focused on the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations. The Aurora Seniors' Centre, he said, is closed again due to present health restrictions after a brief re-opening window of two months.

Although the Minister did not weigh in on the specifics of the Seniors' Centre proposal, Dr. LeGallais said the Board of the ASA was considering requiring all members receive vaccinations should they want to participate in activities hosted by the Seniors' Centre.

?Since we were only open for two months and we're closed again,? he said. ?But of 40 different activities, we had only access to six of them because of the health standards. We couldn't bring the other activities in. When we went into Code Red, we could only get ten people in a room. We're probably servicing about five per cent of our members.

?My question to you is once we are able to open again and vaccines are available to all seniors, our Board was considering mandatory vaccinations for people who come into the Centre. I am not sure if legally we can do this, but what I do know is if we can do it we are going to get a lot more people coming into the Centre because they are going to feel safer and we can probably add most of our activities back again.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter