

Good evening, and Happy Senior Centres Week. I'm Tracey Braun, Director of Senior Centres at Calgary Seniors Resource Society. I'm also on the board of the Alberta Association of Senior Centres, an organization that advocates for senior centres at the provincial level.

Let's get the stats out of the way early. As of May 2011, there were 118,740 seniors (65+) in Calgary (9.8%, provincial average is 11.1%, national is 14.8%).

Most seniors in Calgary, as in other urban centres, live independently. In 2006 (just waiting for the latest stats), 71% lived in homes they owned, 19% lived in rental units and 7% lived in provincial housing. Only 3% lived in long-term care facilities. 19% of seniors in Calgary live alone.

Today, 1 in 10 Calgarians are seniors. By 2031, 1 in 5 Calgarians will be over the age of 65. At this point, we will have more people over 65 than under 14 living in Calgary.

Thanks to programs like Old Age Security, the number of seniors living in poverty has been dropping. But Alberta has the highest number of seniors who are still in the workforce, largely because it continues to be difficult to make ends meet on only a retirement income.

So the number of seniors is growing, which means the number of seniors requiring support for daily living is growing, the number of seniors isolated from their communities is growing and the number of seniors needing programs and services is growing. This is why it is so important that we connect senior centres, and seniors drop-in programs in general, to the health care continuum in our province.

For the past five years, I've been working with the freestanding senior centres in Calgary. These centres provide educational and recreational drop-in programs for people aged 50 and over, all of which contain an element of socialization. We know that being connected to your community, regardless of age, is an important part of healthy living.

A research project done for Bow Cliff Seniors in 2010 identified five areas that continued to challenge senior centres in Calgary:

1. Funding – for operations (staff, equipment) and capital (need for new building)
2. Connecting with isolated seniors (community awareness)
3. Member retention (including increasing boomer-specific programs)
4. Transportation (getting seniors to and from programs in daytime and evening)
5. Volunteerism (changing skills required, hours needed)

Senior centres are also facing challenges as they evolve from a social-recreational model to a health-wellness model. This reflects the belief that “retirement” is becoming less about “leisure” and more about “fulfillment”. It also reflects the need to reinvent themselves in a way that makes them relevant to the boomer generation, who have a very different expectation of their post-65 life.

Part of my work at CSRS is also to oversee the Healthy Living Program, which is developing specialized programs to be offered in a variety of locations around Calgary, including here at Parkdale Nifty Fifties. We're doing this both to connect with seniors where they are (what we call "natural gathering places"), to support the work being done by Outreach and Support Services by other organizations, and to connect with that boomer generation. For our team, Healthy Living is more than just avoiding illness for as long as possible. It's about helping individuals make good choices, providing good programs and services, and advocating for good legislation. It's about making the healthy choice the easy choice.

And to do that, governments need to put money into prevention and community-based programs for seniors. Groups like the Alberta Association of Senior Centres continue to advocate for solutions that support seniors in making healthy choices. We know that Calgarians support these as well. Today's Vital Signs Report (Calgary Foundation), for example gave Calgary a C+ on dealing with aging issues, and respondents identified three ways this grade could improve:

1. developing more options for assisted living
2. reducing seniors' isolation
3. developing more options for seniors' housing, including ways for them to stay in community

So we get it, and the community gets it, and I truly believe the government gets it. If we don't address the question of seniors' care in all its forms, we'll continue to see seniors failing between the cracks.

In closing, I wanted to make one specific comment about the film. Our team watched it a few weeks ago, and the story one caregiver told of the senior who died alone has continued to haunt me since. There is a tension in non-profit work between the quantitative – counting numbers, calculating statistics – and the qualitative – the anecdotal parts of our work that have so much meaning to individuals. The relationship between two people, whatever their role, is not something that can be forced, nor can it be ignored. In a senior centre, there is an increasing tension between building of relationships and completing administrative duties. The solution lies in more options, more places to gather, and more choices for seniors. And we, the non-senior population – or the youngsters, as I'm often referred to – need to get engaged in the lives of seniors. We need to know who is in our neighbourhoods, where they gather, and how we can support them to live full, active, rewarding lives no matter their age or stage.

Thank you.