

'We're people too': Canada's homeless population is aging, changing how shelters run



VANCOUVER — Seventy-one-year-old Roger Oake sat on a bench outside the Union Gospel Mission shelter in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside after breakfast.

He had been sleeping at the shelter for about a month "this time" and said that after several years of homelessness, walking "the beat" during the day when the shelter isn't open has become harder as he gets older.

"I really don't know where to even begin. There's so many things that could or should change, but I really don't know," he said on Wednesday.

"We're people too, you know? We're not just bums, we're not just hobos looking for a handout. We are what we are and we're at where we're at — and that's basically where it's at."

In major cities across the country, those who provide shelter and services for people who are homeless say they are seeing more elderly people turn to them for help.

It's leading to a shift in how they do their jobs and the type of care they are providing. They often must juggle complex medical needs with basic considerations, like ensuring seniors get beds closest to accessible washrooms, and that power sockets are available to charge mobility scooters overnight.

Nick Wells, a spokesperson for Union Gospel Mission, said more than 1,000 people sleep in the shelter every year and that the number of elderly users spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to grow.

"The number of people in the 61-to-65 age range keeps growing at about two per cent every year," he said. "If you look at it from 55-plus, around COVID, they accounted for about a quarter of our shelter population, and now we're up to one-third."

Wells said teams that work around B.C. have heard of seniors who do not have enough money at retirement to keep up with housing and other costs of living. Some have been evicted when their long-term rental homes are renovated, he said.

"There's been a couple cases, and these are really tragic, that a senior's gone into hospital for a health issue and had an extended stay, and then when they've come back, they've discovered that they've been evicted because they haven't paid their rent," he said.

"So they've just come back to no home and then they end up here."

Wells said that along with helping clients complete pension or old-age security applications online, staff sometimes have to help with medical issues like Alzheimer's and dementia.

In one case, a former shelter user was able to secure a spot in full-time transitional housing in the same building. But he returned to the shelter space to use the washroom.

"He remembers how to get down there. He remembers how the bathrooms are laid out, but then he needs help getting back to the (transitional housing) floor, because he can't really remember the ins and outs of going back there," he said.

"So we will have a staff member help guide him back up. That's not a problem whatsoever, I don't want to even suggest that, but it is something that I don't think people would have thought about a couple years ago."

UNIQUE NEEDS OF HOMELESS SENIORS

The Mustard Seed runs a dozen 24-hour emergency shelters in Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia with a total of 747 beds.

Numbers provided by the agency show that at the Calgary women's shelter, the percentage of clients aged 51 and older has gone from 25.4 per cent in 2024 to 28.4 per cent this year.

The shelter in Red Deer saw the proportion of clients 55 and older jump from 12 per cent in 2023 to 29 per cent in 2024.

Samantha Lowe, Mustard Seed's senior director of shelter operations, said the experience of chronic homelessness can age someone differently than those with secure housing, meaning the definition of what qualifies as a "senior" can be different than the conventional definition of 65 years old.

"Somebody who has experienced, say, chronic or episodic homelessness and has aged within that population will need those supports earlier," she said.

"The physiological age of somebody who's experienced so much in their life, they may be 55 and they present like a 75-year-old in terms of their co-morbidities and everything they've got going on, whether that's in their lungs or their heart or their social situation or their mental health."

Lowe said staff are seeing more elderly clients who struggle to manage medications for illnesses ranging from diabetes and breathing problems to cancer, on top of the cost of housing.

"You're having to choose between that or housing. And so we're having folks who are coming in with more chronic conditions that staff are then having to be more knowledgeable about," she said.

Lowe said one shelter is able to allow oxygen tanks to be present, but that's not possible in all spaces.

She said there are people in emergency shelters waiting for spots in supportive housing and dedicated seniors housing. Lowe said shelters also have clients nearing the end of their lives.

"We have people who have disclosed that they are dying of cancer, they have a certain amount of time left in the prognosis, but they're really hesitant to go into hospital, and so we work with them to see if we can get them into hospice," she said.

"We work with them to see if we can prevent that acute crisis that they do end up in hospital, if they're hesitant to go there ... but it's quite challenging."

In Toronto, the Salvation Army runs the Islington Seniors' Shelter, an 83-bed 24-hour shelter for men and women experiencing homelessness who are 55 and older.

Spokesman Glenn van Gulik said the facility is at capacity, and while the organization does not maintain a wait-list, beds fill up fast when they become available.

"There's over 8,000 people who are currently experiencing homelessness within Toronto, and what we know to be true is just about 20 per cent of those who have responded ... are over 55," he said.

"It's going up."

The Islington shelter offers three-bedroom suites, each with a shared bathroom, and staff familiar with the unique needs of homeless seniors.

Van Gulik said that could mean helping with dietary needs, connecting with landlords to help find rentals for people on a fixed income, or finding dental care for aging mouths.

He said the style of living, with both men and women and shared spaces, also helps combat the loneliness that can come with aging.

Wells said there have been steps in the right direction, like the opening of more seniors housing in B.C.

He said there needs to be broad conversation between governments and health-care and service providers about the kind of wraparound supports elderly homeless people need, including more housing options and rent protections.

Mo Singh Khunkhun sometimes sleeps and eats at the Union Gospel Mission emergency shelter in Vancouver.

He's easy to spot, with his formerly grey beard dyed a bright purple.

"People like it, you know? I don't do boring," he said on Wednesday.

Khunkhun is 68, and worked most of his adult life, including in construction and on farms. But he has been homeless for about eight years since the heat failed in his last apartment and he fell behind on rent.

He's stayed at various facilities and has watched as more seniors turn up.

"I don't know what proportion is increasing, but I'm sure there is an increase," he said.

He said he considers himself in good health, and tries to help others as they age, whether that means going for a walk, telling a joke or just having a conversation.

"Some will talk about their health issues," he said. "But a lot of them, they just have the camaraderie of being here, you know?"