

# FACT SHEET:

## The Gap in Affordable Housing for Low-Income Seniors: Defining the Problem and Finding Solutions



### Definitions

#### **Subsidized Rent-Geared-to-Income Housing:**

Subsidized rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing is a policy designed to ensure affordability for low-income people by guaranteeing that a person pays no more than 30% of their income for housing and has money remaining to pay for their other expenses.

**Community Housing:** The community housing sector builds and operates non-market housing and includes both co-operative and non-profit housing providers. Subsidized RGI housing in BC is delivered by the community housing sector or directly by BC Housing.

### SUMMARY OF KEY MESSAGES

#### **Growing need for affordable housing solutions for seniors**

- Today seniors' rates of low income in BC (15.2%) are nearly double that of any other age group.
- In 2023, the average cost of a 1-bedroom apartment in BC was \$1,558 per month – meaning a senior needs an annual income of over \$62,320 for this apartment to be affordable.
- Most seniors living alone (84%) have incomes well below \$60,000 and 51% have incomes below \$35,000. This means that for single senior renters, whose income is \$35,000 or less, rents must be under \$875 a month to be affordable.
- As rental costs have risen, these low-income seniors find themselves with fewer options. Between 2016 and 2021, BC saw an overall loss of almost 100,000 homes (or 20,000 a year) renting below \$1,000 per month. With an 18% increase in rental costs between 2021 and 2023, the loss of affordable rental units continues to accelerate.
- Based on data from the 2021 Census, it is estimated that there are 37,865 low-income senior households living in unaffordable, unsuitable, or inadequate rental housing in BC. And yet, since 2021 BC Housing reports that only 537 net new seniors subsidized rent-geared-to-income (RGI) units were built; this shows the dramatic need for new policies, funding, and action to increase access to affordable rental homes for low-income seniors and other low-income British Columbians.

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## SUMMARY OF KEY MESSAGES CONTINUED...

### There are solutions that will increase affordable housing for low-income seniors.



**The first solution is to protect existing affordable housing units.** It is 50 to 70% less expensive to save the existing stock of affordable housing than build new housing. This is beginning to happen in BC through the BC Rental Protection Fund where older affordable rental buildings in the private market (i.e. three story walk up) are purchased and converted to non-profit housing. But much more is needed including an expansion of this housing acquisitions program, funding to repair and maintain older rental buildings, the extension of operating agreements for existing subsidized RGI housing, and the implementation of vacancy controls.



**The second solution is to increase the investment in subsidized RGI housing.** This kind of community housing guarantees that a senior pays no more than 30% of their income for housing and has money remaining to pay for their other expenses. Housing Central, a partnership of the Aboriginal Housing Management Association, BC Non-Profit Housing Association, and the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC, recommends that 12,000 affordable rental homes be built per year over the next decade for households with an annual income of less than \$50,000. Each year, over half of the units (6,600) would be designated for very-low and low-income individuals who can afford rents of less than \$790 per month and the remaining units (5,400) would be for low- and moderate-income individuals who require rents below \$1,264.

We agree that this would be a very positive step. A commitment to build 120,000 homes over ten years is more than four times the provincial government's current commitment to provide subsidized RGI rental housing through the community housing sector.

It is also important to ensure that there is a transparent and fulsome review process by government to regularly assess the housing needs of low-income seniors and other populations and adjust the funding allocated to reflect growing needs and future shortfalls.

To significantly scale up access to subsidized RGI housing for low-income seniors (and other low-income peoples) in BC, the priority of all levels of government needs to be to:

- Increase direct capital investments and operating subsidies to the community housing sector so that they can build and operate subsidized RGI housing that is affordable to low-income seniors.
- Prioritize access to publicly owned low cost or free land for community housing developers who provide housing to seniors and/or other low-income populations. This action can decrease developments costs by 15 to 25%.

## SUMMARY OF KEY MESSAGES CONTINUED...

- Decrease construction costs for new subsidized RGI housing (e.g., zoning for higher density, policies to fast-track developments, waiving development and permitting fees, and scaling up the use of wood construction).



Finally, we recognize that it takes time for new housing to be built and there are many low-income British Columbians who require housing affordability relief now. **Rental supplements (e.g., SAFER) can be used as a third solution** to address the immediate needs of some low-income seniors but need to be increased to align with the actual costs of the rental market.

## GROWING HOUSING AFFORDABILITY CRISIS FOR BC'S SENIORS



Population aging, coupled with rapidly rising costs of living and inadequate retirement incomes, are contributing to a growing number of seniors experiencing housing precarity later in life. Seniors 55+ made up 21% (1,424) of the individuals counted in homeless counts across BC in 2023 - including 389 seniors aged 65+. Almost half of the seniors counted (42%) were experiencing homelessness for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, seniors have received limited policy attention in terms of their housing rights, as improvements to retirement income benefits in the 1970s dramatically reduced the low-income rates for seniors to levels lower than those of other age groups. However, today seniors' rates of low income in BC (15.2%) are nearly double that of any other age group.<sup>2</sup> This means that market, and even below-market rents, are unaffordable for many low-income seniors, particularly if they live alone.

In 2023, the average cost of a 1-bedroom apartment in BC skyrocketed to \$1,558 per month<sup>3</sup> - meaning a senior needs an annual income of over \$62,320 for this apartment to be affordable (i.e. 30% or less of their income).

Approximately 84% of seniors 65+ who are living alone have after-tax incomes below \$60,000 and would find the average 1-bedroom rental apartment unaffordable in BC. In fact, 51% have incomes below \$35,000 and would be at risk of homelessness renting this apartment.<sup>i</sup> These seniors require rents of under \$875 a month for housing to be affordable. Couples fare better, but about one-third have an income below \$60,000 and would still find this apartment unaffordable.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>i</sup> A person is considered precariously housed and at risk of homelessness when they spend 50% or more of their income on housing.

## DRAMATIC LOSS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING OPTIONS FOR LOW-INCOME SENIORS

In Canada, a key factor contributing to the dramatic increase in housing costs has been the financialization of housing, where maximizing profits has taken precedence over government's role in ensuring access to affordable housing for low-income people.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1990s when the federal government stepped back from its leadership role in developing and financing rental housing, there has been a severe lack of investment in affordable rental housing.

**The emotional outlook of our clients is overwhelmingly dark. It's, there's a lot of language around: I failed, I didn't want a handout, I thought I did everything right. Yeah, so there was a belief that there was a support structure in place. And I find that for seniors the shock of like: What do you mean, there's no housing? What do you mean, there's no support?**

Quote from Service Provider in  
*Aging in Uncertainty Report*

Low-income seniors now find themselves with few options to turn to within the current housing market. As housing costs have risen in BC, non-subsidized low-cost rental options (e.g., older apartment buildings, motels) are being lost or made unaffordable due to redevelopments, renovictions and evictions, and rent increases. According to BC Non-Profit Housing Association, in the 5-year period between 2016 and 2021, BC saw an overall loss of approximately 100,000 homes renting below \$1,000 per month<sup>6</sup> - meaning an annual loss of about 20,000 each year. With an 18% increase in rental costs between 2021 and 2023,<sup>3</sup> this loss of affordable rental units continues to accelerate.

## CRITICAL NEED FOR SUBSIDIZED RENT-GEARED-TO-INCOME HOUSING FOR SENIORS IN BC

As more low-income seniors are struggling to keep up with rising housing costs, there is a growing demand for subsidized rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing.

For low-income seniors, their quality of life varies significantly depending on whether they are living in subsidized RGI housing versus regular rental housing with or without the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) rental benefit (see table 1).

If a 65-74 year old senior who is reliant on government income benefits lived in 30% RGI housing, that senior would have \$1,324 at the end of the month to pay for other expenses such as food, medications, transportation, internet, and other basic needs. This is a huge increase compared to

the \$660 (with SAFER benefit) or \$333 (no benefit) the senior would have remaining when renting the average 1-bedroom apartment. Even if the senior is also receiving the maximum Canada Pension Plan amount the average 1-bedroom apartment is still not affordable.

Table 1. Housing Scenarios for a Low-Income Senior

Housing Scenario	Scenario 1. Subsidized RGI Housing (30% of Income)	Scenario 2. Renting Average 1-Bedroom Apartment With SAFER Benefit	Scenario 3. Renting Average 1-Bedroom Apartment With No Benefits
<b>Example 1. Senior Receiving Government Income Benefits</b>			
Monthly Income of Senior	\$1,891	\$1,891	\$1,891
Monthly Cost of Housing	\$567	\$1,231	\$1,558
Remaining Income for Other Expenses	\$1,324	\$660	\$333
<b>Example 2. Senior Receiving Government Income Benefits and Canada Pension Plan</b>			
Monthly Income of Senior	\$2,308	\$2,308	\$2,308
Monthly Cost of Housing	\$692	\$1,383	\$1,558
Remaining Income for Other Expenses	\$1,616	\$925	\$750

Notes: Calculations were made based on a senior aged 65-74 who is living alone. In example 1 data is from the BC Senior's Supplement Rate Table (OAS + GIS + BC Seniors Supplement = \$1,891). To calculate example 2 the OAS Benefits Estimator was used for a senior who is reliant on government income benefits (OAS + GIS = \$943 - amount is lower as senior no longer qualifies for BC Senior Supplement and receives a reduced GIS amount) and also receiving the maximum Canada Pension Plan amount (\$1,365). The cost of housing for scenarios 2 and 3 is estimated as \$1,558. The SAFER benefit was calculated as \$327 (example 1) and \$175 (example 2) for a senior living in Vancouver using BC Housing's Rental Assistance Calculator. All amounts were calculated in September 2024 and rounded to the nearest dollar.

## AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS GOOD FOR THE HEALTH OF SENIORS

In addition to providing seniors with an affordable way to meet their housing needs, subsidized RGI housing also has the potential to improve the health of seniors and decrease health care costs.

Housing is a well-established social determinant of health, and our health is impacted by the stability of our housing, its quality and safety, housing affordability, and the neighbourhoods we live in.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, housing precarity is associated with a number of negative health outcomes

for seniors, including cardiovascular conditions, depression, and activity limitations.<sup>8,9,10</sup> In addition, research from Canada and internationally has shown that high housing costs are associated with higher levels of avoidable mortality and suicides. However, these impacts are lessened when countries have more community housing.<sup>11</sup>

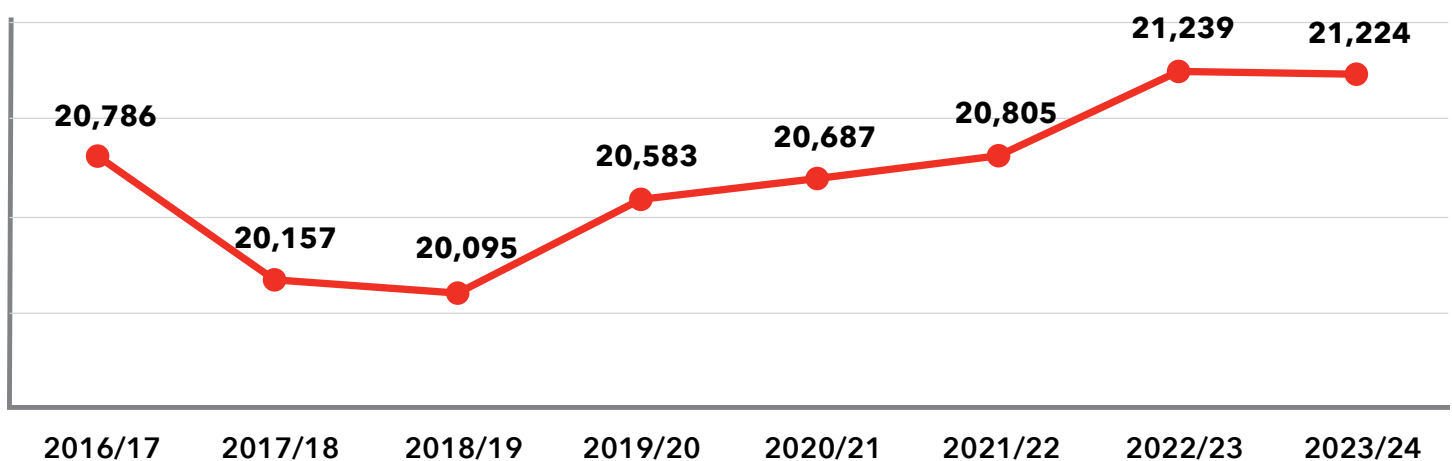
Initiatives to address homelessness and housing precarity have the potential to not only improve the health of seniors, but also to reduce health care system costs. For example, in Canada, the average hospital stay of a patient experiencing homelessness costs approximately double (\$16,800) the national average.<sup>12</sup> Research from the United States suggests that providing housing to homeless seniors results in reduced acute care use and reduced health care costs.<sup>13,14</sup>

## THE SHORTFALL OF SUBSIDIZED RGI HOUSING IN BC

Subsidized RGI housing is provided primarily by the community housing sector and most is subsidized through BC Housing. Unfortunately, access to subsidized RGI housing for seniors is not keeping pace with demand. For example, in 2022 there were approximately 8,707 seniors on waitlists for this type of housing.<sup>15</sup>

While the seniors' population in BC has increased by 28% from 2017 to 2024,<sup>ii</sup> access to subsidized RGI housing has stagnated (see figure 1). Over this period, there was only a 2% increase in independent seniors subsidized RGI units.

Figure 1. Number of Independent Seniors Subsidized RGI Units in BC, 2016/17-2023/24



Data Sources: 2016/17 to 2021/22: Data request from BC Housing. 2022/23: Office of the Seniors Advocate. Monitoring Seniors Services Report. 2023. Data Table 3.2.4. 2023/24: BC Housing. Our Organization. 2024. Accessed June 15, 2024. <https://www.bchousing.org/about/our-organization>

ii According to the BC Population Projections Application the 65+ seniors population increased from 877,408 to 1,125,588.

Based on data from the 2021 Census, it has been estimated that in BC there are approximately 37,865 very low- and low-income<sup>iii</sup> senior-led renter households (i.e., who require rents of less than \$1,100 per month) living in unaffordable, unsuitable, or inadequate rental housing<sup>iv</sup> in BC.<sup>16</sup> Given the rising costs of rents, this number has likely increased significantly over the last three years.

Since the 2021 Census, a net increase of only 537 seniors subsidized RGI units was reported by BC Housing. There is an urgent need for affordable housing solutions to meet the needs of seniors.

A modest number of additional new seniors subsidized RGI units will potentially be built via the Community and Indigenous Housing Funds in the coming years. Since 2018, these funds have been government's main vehicles for building new housing for low-income seniors and other low-income peoples. However, only 2,500 of the units built to date through the Community Housing Fund<sup>17</sup> are targeted towards the lowest income people who require rents of less than \$700 to be affordable.<sup>v</sup> (See our second fact sheet [Making Rental Housing Affordable for People with Low-Incomes](#) for more details). This is not nearly enough to keep pace with the growing need for affordable housing.

In addition, the operating agreements<sup>vi</sup> for almost 30,000 units of subsidized RGI community housing units across BC will expire by 2033, and 51% of these will be seniors' units.<sup>18</sup> When these agreements expire, the housing providers become fully responsible for the financial costs and most will not be able to afford to continue to provide subsidized RGI units.

Without action to address expiring operating agreements and with the large loss of older market rentals that cost under \$1,000 a month, it will be very difficult at the current pace to increase the number of seniors subsidized RGI units to meet demand, as the new units being built will simply replace a small fraction of the more affordable older units being lost.

## HOW TO INCREASE ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR LOW-INCOME SENIORS



**Goal: To retain the existing stock of low-income rental housing for all age groups.**

As described previously, BC is currently experiencing the loss of many subsidized RGI housing units due to expiring operating agreements (approximately 15,000 of these units are for senior-led households), as well as the loss of other non-subsidized low-cost housing options due to redevelopments and rising rental costs (between 2016 and 2021 there was an estimated loss of 20,000 units each year of rental housing that costs less than \$1,000 a month).

iii This refers to people that are in the bottom 20% of income earners and have incomes below \$43,000.

iv Affordability is the main issue for most of these households, with 36,420 living in unaffordable housing.

v These units are targeted at people with incomes of less than \$22,935 for bachelor or 1-bedroom units and \$28,669 for units with 2+ bedrooms. It is unclear how many of these units are specifically for seniors.

vi Operating agreements are agreements between non-profit or co-op housing providers and the provincial and/or federal Governments to provide funding for subsidized RGI housing and usually are tied to the amortization length of the building's mortgage.

While the Province of BC has committed to continuing to fund its share of federal/provincial cost-shared projects, even after operating agreements expire,<sup>18</sup> greater investments by the federal government are needed to protect existing subsidized RGI housing.

In addition, capital funding and low interest financing is also required to extend the life of or regenerate older buildings that require major repairs. For example, a recent analysis by the Aboriginal Housing Management Association showed that approximately 35% of their administered buildings are in critical condition and likely will need to be repaired or replaced in the future.<sup>19</sup> Housing Central<sup>vii</sup> has estimated that an investment of approximately \$557 million annually over the next 10 years is needed from federal government, provincial government, and community partner sources for repairs to existing community housing.<sup>20</sup>

Housing acquisition programs can also be a key component of strategies to preserve and increase access to non-market housing, as acquiring existing housing is estimated to be about 50 to 70% less expensive than building new affordable housing.<sup>21</sup> Housing acquisition strategies have been implemented internationally and in Canada to purchase existing rental housing or properties (e.g., hotel, motels) that can be transformed into rental housing.<sup>21</sup> The Province of BC's introduction of the \$500 million Rental Protection Fund in January 2023 to purchase existing purpose-built rental buildings has been a very positive step<sup>6</sup> and has already saved over 2,000 homes. The recent development of the Canadian Rental Protection Fund provides the opportunity to leverage federal funds to protect rental housing as well. With continued investments by federal and provincial government sources, Housing Central estimates we can protect 2,000 rental homes each year over the next 10 years.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the lack of vacancy controls in BC provides landlords with a loophole to circumvent rent controls and increase rents between tenancies to unaffordable levels for low-income people. In BC, the average rent for a newly vacant unit is 28% higher than for occupied units.<sup>22</sup> Vacancy control was in place previously in BC until 1983, and it has been recommended that the provincial government reinstate vacancy controls.<sup>23, 24</sup> We recognize that vacancy controls could potentially have a negative impact on non-profit housing providers given that raising rents between tenants is one of the only ways they can keep up with the rising cost of operations. Therefore, steps would need to be taken to ensure that vacancy controls are implemented in a manner that ensures the continued financial viability of non-profit housing - including consulting with non-profit housing providers to determine the best way to implement vacancy controls.



**Goal: To increase access to subsidized RGI housing for low-income people of all ages (i.e., where tenants pay no more than 30% of their income on housing).**

Housing Central has issued the call to action for 12,000 not-for-profit affordable rental homes to be built per year over the next decade for households earning less than \$50,000 annually.<sup>20</sup>

vii Housing Central is a partnership of the Aboriginal Housing Management Association, BC Non-Profit Housing Association, and the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC.



Approximately 2,740 of these homes built each year would specifically be for Indigenous peoples.<sup>viii</sup> The 12,000 rental homes<sup>ix</sup> built each year would include:

- 6,600 rental homes for very low- and low-income people who require rents of less than \$790 per month
- 5,400 rental homes for low- and moderate-income people who require rents of less than \$1,264 per month

We agree that this would be a very positive step. A commitment to build 120,000 homes over ten years is more than four times the provincial government's current commitment to provide subsidized RGI rental housing through the community housing sector. It is also important to ensure that there is a transparent and fulsome review process by government to regularly assess the housing needs of low-income seniors and other populations and adjust the funding allocated to reflect growing needs and future shortfalls.

Key challenges to building new subsidized RGI housing include time, costs, and uncertainty, so any steps governments and partners can take to address these challenges enhance the capacity of community housing providers to build new subsidized RGI housing. Below we share policy ideas to support and accelerate the development of subsidized RGI housing in BC.

### ***Direct Capital Investments and Operating Subsidies for Community Housing Developers***

It is widely recognized that not-for-profit developers are a much more economical choice than for-profit developers to build affordable rental housing – with potential cost savings between 20 to 30% of total construction costs.<sup>25</sup> This is due to not-for-profit developers having no expectations of developer profits, as well as the availability of preferential financing options. However, in many parts of BC it is estimated that even with the provision of low or no-cost land and wood construction (see next sections), the lowest rents that not-for-profit developers can offer are still not affordable for people with the lowest incomes and highest need for affordable housing.<sup>26</sup> The provincial and federal governments need to further offset costs by increasing access to capital grants and operating subsidies.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Free or Low-Cost Public and Non-Profit Land for Equity Groups***

Providing community housing developers with access to non-profit or publicly owned land for free or at a low cost can decrease the costs of new housing developments by between 15 to 25%.<sup>25</sup>

Governments purchasing land and releasing it for housing development (land banking) or leasing publicly owned land for affordable housing are common practices in many countries including Singapore, Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands.<sup>28</sup>

Currently through the BC Builds strategy, land is being prioritized for housing for middle income working people in BC. Free or low-cost land also needs to be prioritized for low-income and

<sup>viii</sup> For more information about needed Indigenous housing solutions please view the Aboriginal Housing Management Association's [British Columbia Urban, Rural, And Northern Indigenous Housing Strategy](#).

<sup>ix</sup> In addition to these homes, Housing Central also calls for 500 supportive housing units to be built each year.

equity-seeking groups. In addition to providing access to surplus land, underutilized land (e.g., government service centres, post offices) can potentially be taken advantage of and redeveloped to include housing.<sup>27</sup>

### **Decreasing Construction Costs**

Additional actions can also be taken at the municipal and provincial government levels in order to decrease construction costs for new subsidized RGI housing.

*Zoning for Higher Density:* Most residential land is reserved for low-density housing. The process to get land rezoned for higher density housing can be very costly (e.g., in Vancouver a rezoning process could cost between \$500,000 to \$1 million).<sup>29</sup> The Province of BC could address this issue by changing municipal zoning to allow low-rise affordable rental apartments to be built on land where single-family homes can be.<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that while upzoning can create more housing, it does not guarantee that housing will be affordable, therefore policies would need to require all or a specific proportion of the new density added be for community housing.

*Fast Tracking Affordable Housing Developments:* Changes to the Local Government Act in 2021 now allow municipalities to fast-track housing developments by a) no longer requiring public hearings for changes to zoning if developments are consistent with the municipality's Official Community Plan and b) allowing municipal staff to approve permits and variances. The City of Victoria has passed legislation in accordance with these changes to fast-track developments and estimates that this will reduce the time required to build new housing by 9 months.<sup>30</sup> Other municipalities could consider similar actions.

*Waiving Development and Permitting Fees:* In some communities, permit and development fees can make up almost 20% of the costs of building housing.<sup>30</sup> If a municipality waives or reduces these fees, this can significantly reduce development costs. Penticton and Parksville are two municipalities that currently waive 100% of development fees for low-income rental housing.<sup>30</sup>

*Wood Construction:* Wood frame construction is both less expensive than concrete (estimated cost is 20% less expensive per square foot) as well as more environmentally friendly.<sup>26</sup> To date in BC, wood-construction buildings have primarily been under 6 stories, though recent updates to BC's building code will now allow buildings up to 18 stories.<sup>31</sup> SFU Renewable Cities has created a guide outlining how provincial and municipal governments can expand the use of mass timber housing and further decrease the costs of its construction, including the prefabrication of projects.<sup>32</sup>



**Goal: To increase financial assistance for low and moderate-income seniors living in private market rental housing by introducing needed changes in the SAFER program.**

We recognize that it takes time for new housing to be built and there are many low-income seniors who require immediate housing affordability relief. Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) is a

rental supplement available for low-income seniors (60+) with an income below \$37,240 who are renting in the private market.<sup>33</sup>

While there have been some modest improvements made to the SAFER program recently, the main limitation of SAFER continues to be that the subsidies provided do not align with actual rental market costs, as was acknowledged in a recent review by BC Housing.<sup>34</sup> Rental ceilings for calculating subsidies are set at \$931<sup>33</sup> and in comparison, the average monthly rental cost for a 1-bedroom apartment is \$1,558. When calculating a SAFER subsidy, the \$627 in rent above the \$931 rent ceiling is not taken into account. SAFER rent ceilings should be reviewed annually and adjusted to align with average rents for the area based on Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation data, so subsidies will be tied to the actual costs of the rental market. For other suggested improvements for SAFER please see our [SAFER briefing note](#).

Improvements to SAFER may be a way to meet the needs of some of the 37,865 senior-led renter households whose housing currently does not meet their needs. However, it is important to acknowledge that SAFER only offers a stopgap solution for seniors and does not increase the affordable housing supply that we so desperately need. Investing in building new subsidized RGI housing must be the long-term priority.

## Background Note

This fact sheet was prepared by Laura Kadowaki and Marcy Cohen on behalf of the Seniors Housing Working Group, a committee of the Community Based Seniors' Services Leadership Council. The Leadership Council advises United Way BC's Healthy Aging Department and is a provincially-represented body of leaders working in the not-for-profit and municipal-based seniors' services sector, as well as older adults who are leaders in this sector. The Housing Working Group includes members from urban and rural communities throughout BC who have an interest in, and knowledge of, seniors' housing needs, challenges, models, and/or solutions.

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