

Sorry No Vacancy Housing Survey

Since Spinal Cord Injury BC (SCI BC) started its provincial InfoLine service in 2010, staff members have kept statistics on why people with mobility disabilities contact us. Accessible housing continues to be a key concern. This study was designed to find out exactly what the problems are, from people who need accessible housing and those who are assisting them. The considerations for next steps are directly based on what our survey respondents told us. This study was not meant to provide an evaluation of the available accessible housing stock in BC but rather to further develop our understanding of who needs accessible housing in BC and the problems they are having in finding and affording it.



KEY FINDINGS

- There is limited availability of accessible housing, and subsidized housing is even more difficult to find.
- The aging population is expected to make the shortage of accessible housing more acute.
- People who wish to move to another community for school or work may wait years for an accessible place to live.
- Accessible housing benefits everyone and the extra costs are negligible when accessibility is included from the beginning.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Develop a central registry of accessible housing in BC, including subsidized and market rent, co-ops, and real estate for sale.
- Create a portable rent subsidy for those who need accessible housing, to increase access to private market options
- Continue subsidies to co-ops for low-income housing.
- Update the BC Building Code to require, at minimum, visitable housing.
- Increase the numbers of accessible housing units in subsidized housing buildings.



INTRODUCTION

People with spinal cord injury and related physical disabilities want something that most people in society take for granted: a home. For people with limited mobility, finding a home with even basic accessibility is very difficult.

SCI BC has been providing information on accessible housing for many years. We maintain a Housing List of Vacancies and the Accessible Housing BC website where we provide information on the latest housing vacancies in the province. Inquiries for information on suitable housing options are the most frequently requested resource on our Toll Free InfoLine every month. Over time, staff members have become more aware of the extent of the housing crisis. This study was undertaken to help us understand more about the scope of the problems facing people with physical disabilities when attempting to find suitable housing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SCI BC statistics indicate that housing remains a primary concern for people with spinal cord injury and related physical disabilities, month after month. Anecdotal evidence from other service providers, including health authority staff, suggests that the problem is widespread.

In 2003 Soles pointed out from the Saskatchewan context that anecdotal evidence of the problems around accessible housing is strong. However, she found limited statistical evidence of the problem and stated that more research needed to be done on the demographics of people who need accessible housing. In her study, Soles discovered that most respondents had limited incomes and required affordable housing in addition to their need for accessibility features. Calls to our InfoLine indicate that the situation is similar in BC.

TERMINOLOGY

Terminology for housing that includes accessibility features appropriate for people with physical disabilities varies. Public understanding of these features also varies widely. “In the context of housing and building design, “accessibility” is often taken to mean wheelchair users’ ability to enter and exit a building via ramps and similar devices.” (Soles, 2003, p. 2) However, accessible housing refers to more than that. A brief description of common terminology follows and will be used throughout this report.

Visitable This term refers to housing with one no-step entry, wider doorways, and one bathroom on the main level that a person in a wheelchair can get into (Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, 2007). Visitable housing allows people with mobility challenges to visit friends without worrying about how to access the home and it also makes it easier for people with temporary injuries or illnesses to live at home during the recovery period. Making housing visitable from the design and construction stage is much more affordable than doing renovations later (Perry, 2008). Visitable housing is not meant to provide a long term housing solution to people with serious physical disabilities.

Adaptable This term refers to housing that can be easily adapted for use by people with mobility challenges. Some features are built in, such as in visitable housing, but wall reinforcements may be included in the bathroom, for example, to allow for easy installation of grab bars if needed. Other adaptations may include a wider staircase to other floors to allow for later installation of a stair lift.

Accessible This term refers to housing that already has many features required by people who use wheelchairs. These might include a roll-in shower, a permanent bath bench, ceiling tracks, elevator, lowered light switches, or adapted doorknobs.

Universal design This term refers to initial design choices that address everyone’s needs while maintaining flexibility of use (Connell et al., 1997).

It is important to emphasize that housing that meets any of the above definitions benefits everyone. Housing has traditionally been designed for the average person, which is usually understood to mean a healthy adult. However, the lifespan includes many phases where people have other needs and it is important to see these needs as normal. Just as children cannot reach a sink designed for an adult, a person with mobility problems may not be able to reach a standard sink either. There are additional benefits to people who do not (yet) have a disability, such as delivery people and caregivers for people with disabilities. Wider doorways and level entries make the workplace safer, which reduces occupational injuries (Darcy, n.d.). Each housing unit will be used by many people throughout its lifespan (Canadian Centre for Disability

Studies, 2013); even if the original occupants do not need elements of accessible housing, later occupants will. By making thoughtful design decisions, the built environment will become more useable for all.

There are other terms used in the literature but the ones listed above are the most common in North America.



DISABILITY AND HOUSING

Rates of disability vary depending on the definitions used, but recent research puts the number in Canada at just over 14% of the population for people who identify as having an activity-limiting disability, with a slightly higher rate in BC (Statistics Canada, 2010). This number does not include people who have chronic diseases or who do not identify as needing assistance with daily activities. Because disability rates increase with age (Darcy, n.d.; Statistics Canada) and more people are surviving accidents with severe injuries (Scotts, Saville-Smith & James, 2007), we are seeing an increased need for accessible housing to meet population needs.

Unfortunately, reports and initiatives focused on housing needs, such as Housing Matters BC, rarely mention the need for accessible housing and those brief comments focus on seniors housing. Younger people also need accessible housing and should have housing options other than living in a facility for seniors. Even the Let's Talk Ending Homelessness report (2014) barely mentions accessible housing except in connection with seniors and even then only briefly. The Canadian Institute for Health Information (2004) reported that poor housing has an impact on population health. Vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, experience the increased risk of ill health when living in inadequate housing. Lack of appropriate housing options, the prohibitive cost of modifications as well as potential social isolation are some of the housing-related challenges specific to people with disabilities.

The 2011 survey of people who are homeless in Metro Vancouver, the most recent year for which results are available, indicates that 62% report multiple health conditions and 38% report one health condition. Of these, 47% report a medical condition and 36% report a physical disability (defined in this report as mobility impairments). While not all of these people would require fully accessible housing, it is clear that physical disability is a significant risk factor in homelessness, especially for those who are also low income. Employment rates for people with physical disabilities are still lower than the average, meaning that accessible affordable housing is also needed. 21% of respondents indicated health or disability as a major barrier to finding housing, while 56% cited low income as a major barrier. This survey also highlighted the increasing numbers of seniors surveyed over the past four surveys, indicating an aging trend in the homeless population. Because the incidence of disability increases with age, it is expected that the need for affordable and accessible housing will increase accordingly.

The Home Adaptations for Independence (HAFI) program provides eligible lower income seniors and people with disabilities up to \$20,000 for home renovations to make the homes more accessible. However, as Anzai, Young, McCallum, Miller, and Jongbloed (2006) point out, that money is often not adequate, meaning that “few clients of GF Strong are able to return to their preinjury homes” (p. 17). Thus, scarce housing resources are being strained as people search for adequate accessible housing and many people are forced to live in environments that clearly do not meet their needs. As Gibson et al. (2012) explain, “in Canada where long-term care is primarily oriented to elderly persons and affordable accessible housing is limited, many younger disabled adults are living in circumstances that do not meet their health needs, place undue burden on family members, isolate them from peers and contribute to their social exclusion” (p. 4). When institutional resources are being used to house people who can and want to be living in the community, less money is available to assist others and quality of life is affected for everyone. In fact, a report in Edmonton noted that “homes that are inaccessible may pose substantial health and safety hazards that can result in serious injuries and create a substantial strain on public health services. In 2008 alone, falls by seniors cost the Province of Alberta \$96 million. Accessible housing and universally designed homes reduce the need for long-term care beds, allowing seniors to remain in their homes as long as possible, while also making it easier for people of any age to return home sooner after an illness or injury” (City of Edmonton, 2009).

Heather Brown and Carlos Teixeira found in their study of housing needs for seniors in Kelowna that 87% of seniors surveyed felt that more needed to be done to build accessible housing for seniors in the city and 94% felt that affordability needed to be a priority as well. Larger national studies have found similar results (Canadian Centre for Disability Studies, 2013).

Builders and contractors have expressed concerns about the extra costs associated with building housing with accessibility features. However, including basic accessibility features during the initial building phase involves only minimal extra costs. In addition,

the features can be designed to be an integral and attractive part of the building, rather than added in later under the constraints of the existing structure (City of Edmonton, 2009). The same report compares the costs of building a home that is designed to be easily adapted for accessibility versus adapting a regular home and the cost difference is substantial. Moreover, the costs of hospital stays for seniors who fall in inaccessible homes and subsequent admission to long term care facilities far outweigh the costs of building more functional housing initially (City of Edmonton, 2009).

METHODS

Staff members at SCI BC recognized the importance of being able to provide more assistance to people looking for housing and met to discuss possible solutions. However, it was apparent that not enough was known about the specific housing needs of the people looking for accessible housing. This research project developed from the desire to better understand the problems so that we can more effectively work towards solutions with governments and community partners while providing better service to our members.

An online survey was chosen as the most effective way of connecting with housing seekers across BC. Several staff members developed the questions and survey format. A community member with experience in research and accessibility issues was asked to review the survey while the Executive Director of SCI BC provided final approval and oversight to the project.

The survey was advertised through our webpage, social media, targeted emails to people who have asked for information on accessible housing, our peer network, and word of mouth. Participation was voluntary and no remuneration was given.

PARTICIPANTS

We requested participation from two main groups: housing seekers and those assisting housing seekers. We asked housing seekers to identify their age, gender, and disability but did not require these answers if they chose not to disclose.

We asked those assisting housing seekers to identify their primary reason for assisting with the housing search (such as being a social worker, advocate or family member). We requested this information so we can better target future efforts to ensure that people who need accessible housing and those who are assisting receive the best information possible. Thirty seven percent of those assisting identified as non-profit

service providers, followed by social workers at 16%. Although we had hoped that those assisting housing seekers would fill in the survey for each person they were helping, most completed the survey based on the range of people they assist.

Housing seekers made up 50% of the respondents, while 31% identified as assisting a housing seeker and 19% specified “Other”. Of these, responses included people who just found housing, people who expect to be seeking housing in the future, and people who assisted housing seekers in the past. Of those who chose to specify gender, 56 were female, 50 were male, 10 (those assisting housing seekers) identified as working with both genders, and 1 person indicated transgendered. The respondents’ ages ranged from 11-72 with responses fairly equally spread from 19 to 72. Some service providers indicated they work with people of various ages from 19 to seniors.

We asked about type of disability to get an idea of the range of issues people who need accessible housing face. We know that the likelihood of disability increases with age (Statistics Canada, 2006) and the number of seniors is expected to double by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2012). Therefore, we wanted to better understand how the need for accessible housing changes with age.

Most of the respondents identified as having spinal cord injury or related disabilities such as amputations, Multiple Sclerosis, Muscular Dystrophy or Cerebral Palsy. This makes sense because we marketed the survey primarily to our members and to service providers whom we know work with our members. However, we also had respondents who identified as having a range of health issues including: lung problems, arthritis, chronic fatigue, joint problems, and diabetes, all of which are associated with aging. There were also a few respondents with brain injuries, developmental disabilities, and mental health challenges.

RESULTS

We wanted to know what mobility device respondents used most often, because that is related to the type of accessibility features necessary in a home. More than 30% of respondents use a power wheelchair while 24% use a manual wheelchair most of the time. Thirteen percent use a cane or crutches. Of those who included comments, several use different devices depending on the situation, or would use a manual chair if the home were accessible. Almost 22% indicated they don’t use mobility devices; some of these people need affordable housing but do not yet identify the need for accessible housing. Other respondents have friends that cannot visit because of the lack of accessibility features.

The current housing situation results across the province show that a large percentage of respondents already own or rent housing that is not meeting their needs. The

combined numbers of people who are homeless, couch surfing, living with family, living in a shelter, staying in hospital, etc. are lower than those who rent or own.

More than three times as many respondents indicate that their ideal living situation would be renting, rather than owning, with apartments/condos being the preferred choice for both renting and owning. From the results it is unclear why more respondents wish to rent, but the difficulty of saving for a down payment while living on a low income may be part of the reason. Renting may also offer more flexibility to those with changing household size or who foresee a future need for living in a different location.

About 64% of respondents would like to live in Metro Vancouver while about 56% currently live there. Most respondents indicate a preference to stay in the region of the province where they currently reside. This is consistent with the desire to maintain current family and community support systems.

Respondents indicated a number of reasons for wanting to move, with the main one being the need for more accessible housing.

Please specify your reasons for wanting to move? (check all that apply)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Moving for school	7.0%	8
Moving for work	4.4%	5
Wanting to live independently	30.7%	35
Wanting to have more accessible housing (just squeaking by)	45.6%	52
Current accommodation is not accessible at all	21.1%	24
Divorce or separation or other change in personal relationships	7.9%	9
Unable to afford current housing	36.0%	41
Wanting to transition to the community from a facility	7.9%	9
Eviction	4.4%	5
Dangerous living conditions	21.9%	25
Current housing doesn't allow pets	7.0%	8
Current housing allows pets (I have allergies etc)	0.9%	1
Current housing allows smoking (I have allergies etc)	2.6%	3
Current housing does not allow smoking	0.9%	1
Climate	6.1%	7
Other	24.6%	28

Comments under “Other” include combinations of the reasons already listed on the survey as well as friends who use wheelchairs and want to visit, unhealthy living conditions, problems with landlords, rental accommodation being sold, co-op subsidies ending, limited transit or lack of HandyDart service.

People could choose more than one required accessibility feature, with no-step entry ranking the highest, followed by wider doorways.

What accessibility features do you require to accommodate your needs? (check all that apply)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Visitable (one no-step entry, wider doorways, one useable bathroom on the main level)	54.1%	59
No-step entry	70.6%	77
Wheel-in shower	49.5%	54
Grab bars by the bathtub	57.8%	63
Grab bars by the toilet	48.6%	53
Wider doorways	61.5%	67
Roll-under sink	50.5%	55
Lowered light switches and raised plugs	43.1%	47
Adapted kitchen counters, work station, appliances	58.7%	64
Automatic doors	43.1%	47
Caregivers room	22.0%	24
Ceiling tracks (for personal lifts)	25.7%	28
Environmental controls (automated system for controlling electrical applications)	18.3%	20
Hard surface flooring (laminated, tile or linoleum)	56.0%	61
Laundry room with raised washer/dryer and front mounted controls	41.3%	45
Lever handled fixtures (door and faucet fixtures)	39.4%	43
Other	10.1%	11

Most of the comments under “Other” would actually be covered in the listed options, with the exception of a “chemical free” housing option listed by one person.

Respondents identified many barriers to the housing search, with cost of rent coming first, followed by lack of accessible housing in the desired location.

Please specify the barriers in your housing search? (check all that apply)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
No accessible housing in the location of my choice	60.0%	69
Cost of rent	65.2%	75
Lack of availability of a subsidy	52.2%	60
Access to community amenities (recreation, health services, shopping etc.)	32.2%	37
No available wheelchair accessible home or lack of specific accessibility features	52.2%	60
My family has need for multiple bedrooms and only smaller units are available	17.4%	20
I am a single person and only multiple bedroom units are available	22.6%	26
Age restrictions on available housing (such as for 55+)	24.3%	28
Lack of physical assistance to move when housing is found	34.8%	40
Lack of financial assistance to move when housing is found	40.0%	46
Lifestyle factors (banned by housing providers, drug use, etc.)	9.6%	11
Cannot afford security deposit	24.3%	28
Pet restrictions in available housing	22.6%	26
Do not know where to look for accessible housing	20.0%	23
Lack of accessible public transit near available housing	21.7%	25
Challenges of transferring CSIL funding to a new community	10.4%	12
Other	11.3%	13

Comments under “Other” include a wide variety of barriers, such as unsafe affordable housing, no one to help with the housing search, landlords unwilling to put in features such as grab bars even when HAFI would pay for it, etc.

Twenty one percent of respondents have been waiting more than 5 years for accessible housing and 17% have been waiting more than 5 years for a subsidy. Although some people indicated they hadn’t known subsidies are available, almost 70% of respondents have applied to BC Housing. Just under half of all respondents have accessed SCI BC’s Accessible Housing BC website and the related Housing List of Vacancies.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although just over half of the respondents use a manual or power chair, or a scooter, the nature of the aging process means that some other respondents will need a wheelchair at some point. Between people who currently have disabilities, and members of the general public whose needs are changing as they age, it is safe to predict that there will be a greater need for housing that is usable by people with mobility challenges. This prediction is supported by other research on the changing needs of aging adults.

Our survey indicates that there are wide-ranging needs in accessible housing. A one size fits all approach cannot solve the housing shortages identified here. For example, some people with families need larger units and find only smaller units available in their price range. Likewise, some people who choose to live alone can only find larger units available. This is partly due to the widely scattered information about accessible housing. BC Housing has a registry of buildings that have accessible suites but other providers of subsidized and/or accessible units are not listed on a central registry. Similarly, market rent units and real estate information is found mixed in with information about non-accessible housing. Co-op units can be found on the Co-op Federation of BC website but people must look at the entries for each co-op complex to find out if they are accepting applications and if any of the units are accessible. For those searching for housing, especially for people who are not comfortable on the internet, finding vacancies is time consuming and confusing. The development of some form of central registry of all accessible housing of all types in BC would be a good start.

The two biggest reasons for people wanting to move were “wanting to have more accessible housing (just squeaking by)” and “unable to afford current housing”. The first answer indicates that people do not feel their current housing situation is adaptable or could be easily modified to meet changing needs for accessibility. Combined with the shortage of affordable housing options, this lack of adaptability represents a large obstacle for people.

There is also a wide range of desired accessibility features. In some cases, people may not be familiar with some of the terminology we used, such as visitable housing, which is an unintended weakness of the survey design. However, the most requested accessibility feature is no step entry, followed by wider doorways and modified bathrooms and kitchens. Visitability also ranks highly for survey respondents, indicating that increasing the numbers of visitable housing units in BC would have a positive impact for many. It should be emphasized that visitable housing does not offer sufficient accessibility for everyone and should not be considered a full solution; it would, however, represent a significant improvement in the provincial housing situation. The barriers to the housing search for our respondents show similar challenges, with cost of rent and lack of accessible housing in the area of choice being the most significant. The

fact that 21% of respondents say they have waited more than five years for accessible housing raises serious questions about the effectiveness of our housing system and long term impacts that the wait times have on individuals and communities.

From these results and research done elsewhere, there is a clear need for more accessible and affordable housing units in BC. While building more accessible housing units and putting more money towards housing subsidies will require an initial outlay of money, the longer term benefits include savings in the health care system, use of long term care facilities primarily by people who cannot live in the community, better quality of life for people with disabilities and seniors, improved physical and mental health for people who need accessible housing, and easier discharge planning for those who are leaving hospital or rehab.

Many survey respondents identified the difficulty of finding accessible units, or those that might be adapted reasonably easily. Because accessible units are in short supply and are scattered throughout the province in a mixture of subsidized and market rent units, co-ops, and real estate, people searching for housing often do not know where to start. There is no single place to look for available units and some of those listed online that show up on search engines as wheelchair accessible are not even visitable, causing housing seekers to spend extra time viewing places that would not meet their needs at all. Having a central registry of accessible housing stock in BC, including current vacancies, would greatly assist housing seekers (Evans, 2013). Something similar in concept to SCI BC's Accessible Housing website, but wider in scope, would be helpful. Evans (2013) lists a number of benefits to such a registry, including increasing connections between supply and demand, increased awareness and communication, and developing a better idea of exactly what accessible housing stock already exists.

Over the longer term, there is a definite need for an outlay of capital costs to build more accessible housing to increase the total numbers of units available. Updates to the building codes to require new buildings to be visitable, similar to the bylaws enacted in 2013 in Vancouver, would also help because the overall number of functional units would increase over time.

In the meantime, creating a portable rent subsidy for people with mobility disabilities, similar to the SAFER program for seniors, would allow more flexibility in housing arrangements for people who need accessible housing now. This would reduce waitlists for BC Housing buildings and would enable people to move to new communities as needed for school, work or family changes. Continuing the subsidies that have been available to co-ops for low income people would also allow people who currently have accessible housing to stay where they are.



CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to provide us with more concrete information on the housing challenges faced by people with physical disabilities in BC. From both the literature and our results, we can see a definite need for more accessible and affordable housing options. This need will become more acute as our population ages. It will take time for any new project or policy to have a measurable impact on the housing supply in the province, making it imperative that accessible housing receive immediate attention and action from all levels of government and interested organizations. We recognize that fixing the housing crisis in BC will not be easy and will take years, but starting to address the situation now will mitigate some of the housing problems we foresee with our aging population.

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