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Defining a senior in the 21st century

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There are three broad age categories that distinguish seniors: the “Young Old” who are healthy, fit and reasonably affluent; the “Middle Old” who are starting to slow down and have less money and resources; and the “Frail Old” who are very elderly and have special social and physical needs.

Chronological age as the defining marker of being old is being eroded. Competency is increasingly replacing age as a more appropriate benchmark for behaviour.

At the same time, old age is being defined by less of independence or by ill health. It is recognized that some older seniors face mobility and housing challenges, however, Richmond is addressing the myriad of challenges regarding the need for housing by all low-income residents. We are all looking forward to hearing more about the initiatives being developed in Richmond.

It is quite likely that the “Zoomers,” baby boomers with zip, will redefine the senior years and retirement. Young seniors are generally healthier and wealthier than previous generations of seniors.

Seniors today are living healthy and active lives. They are increasingly active in the labour force. Seniors have the ability to have the choice in when to retire and the choice in where to live. It is recognized the important role of individuals, non-profit organizations, the private sector and the various levels of government in ensuring that seniors have before them a wide range of choices.

Unfortunately, the range of choices is greatest for those with the greatest financial security and more limited for low-income seniors.

The most pressing need is the integration of the various support options available to seniors. The integration of these services could alleviate the pressure seniors and their families currently face, as they try to navigate the many available services to meet ever-changing needs.

A move towards integrated care is happening, perhaps too slowly for many of us, but is happening in Richmond.

We should be able to grow older in the place of our choice. Seniors do express a strong preference for staying in our homes, as we age.

Sometimes support is required to allow seniors to age in the place of their choice. Currently with such demands on their time, family members and friends often have great difficulty balancing work and care for the frail elderly.

Most seniors live in private homes and have a strong preference for staying in their own homes. Factors which push seniors to move out of their homes include inappropriate design or size of the home, loss of spouse or decline in health. Some of us may no longer be able to afford our homes or keep up with the

home maintenance.

British Columbia has now recognized that it is more efficient to plan and build housing and neighbourhoods that will continue to meet the needs of seniors as their health status changes.

The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation has two programs: the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program and the Home Adaptations for Seniors Independence Program. Both assist in adapting homes to allow low-income seniors to live independently in homes that meets basic health and safety standards.

Aileen Cormack writes about seniors issues every month in The Richmond Review.

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