



# OWN Housing Literacy Series:

“What Really Works in Creating Affordable Housing?”

November 16, 2012

## "Abbeyfield: An Affordable Living Alternative for Seniors"

by

**Elizabeth Power, President, Abbeyfield Houses Society of Canada**

Elizabeth began her talk by remarking that although Abbeyfield has been in Canada for 25 years, few Canadians know about it. The aim of the Abbeyfield Houses Society of Canada, which she has headed since 2010, is to end its status as a "best-kept secret" and to develop a strategy for spreading the Abbeyfield model of seniors housing more widely.

Abbeyfield is well-known in Great Britain, where it originated. In 1950, a retired British officer, Major Richard Carr-Gomm, set up Abbeyfield as a charity with the object of tackling the housing shortage and combating the isolation of older seniors. The first Abbeyfield house was founded in East End London in 1956, and the officer became known as the "Scrubbing Major" because he scrubbed the floors himself. There are now 700 Abbeyfield houses in Britain and another 100 around the world. Of these, 26 are running or under construction in Canada, and more are being planned.

Each Abbeyfield house is an incorporated entity, run by its own volunteer board of directors. All are affiliated with the Abbeyfield Houses Society of Canada, headquartered in Toronto, and pay an annual fee of 1% of the income from residents to this umbrella organization. Abbeyfield Canada, in turn, is an affiliate of Abbeyfield International headquartered in London.

Abbeyfield houses differ a great deal from one another. Some, like the one established in Vancouver in 1993, accommodate their residents in a renovated heritage home. More recently, most Abbeyfield houses are purpose-built. Ideally, they are designed for around 10 residents but many now accommodate more and one has 22 residents. Some house only women while others also take in single men and couples. As well, there are differences in the way Abbeyfield houses are financed. In most cases, residents are renters but some purchase their suites through "life-lease" contracts (see Housing Literacy Lecture #4 on Life Lease apartments). Moreover, costs differ from one house to another, depending on whether or not they are built on donated land, the availability of rent subsidies, the size and number of the units, and other factors.

What all Abbeyfield houses have in common is their adherence to the basic Abbeyfield model which provides a warm, friendly home. Key to the success of a house is the House Manager who prepares the meals and creates the feeling of home. The House Manager usually resides in the house herself, but if a live-in House Manager cannot be found, a cook co-ordinator is hired to prepare meals and another staff person is employed to be on site 24/7. Although residents of every Abbeyfield house have their own room or apartment and are encouraged to maintain their contacts with family and community, they enjoy the benefits of living with others. Eating together, they soon come to regard their fellow residents as friends. In addition, volunteers come in to socialize with residents and offer support of various kinds. The end result is a home-like atmosphere in which seniors are able to experience both independent living and companionship.



The Abbeyfield Houses Society is currently developing a strategy to reach groups not served at present, such as low-income seniors, first-generation immigrants with limited English-language skills, aboriginal groups that need seniors housing and younger seniors. The Society has also set up a fundraising Foundation that will enable it to support existing and emerging houses and provide rent subsidies as needed.

***After her short talk, Elizabeth did a Q & A session with the audience, which elicited important additional information.***

- ***How are residents selected?*** Most houses have a list that is administered by the local society. The society makes sure that the needs of applicants do not exceed the capacity of the house to meet them.
- ***What differentiates an Abbeyfield house from a retirement home?*** Retirement homes offer food and care, whereas Abbeyfield offers only one service: food.
- ***What differentiates an Abbeyfield house from a registered boarding house?*** An Abbeyfield house uses volunteers and staff to create a family atmosphere.
- ***What differentiates an Abbeyfield house from a condominium?*** Abbeyfield is able to restrict admittance to seniors.
- ***Are any Abbeyfield houses run as co-ops?*** Given that the average age of residents is 85, this is not practical.
- ***What happens when residents are too sick to cope?*** Abbeyfield supports their seniors as long as possible, but Abbeyfield houses are not suited for those who are unable to get out of bed and get themselves to the dining area. Many Abbeyfield houses have guest rooms where family members or caregivers can stay, and the publicly funded Community Care Access Centres (CCACs) can provide housekeeping assistance. Sometimes, however, more is needed. In those cases, Abbeyfield has developed a strategy for helping people to move out and on. One audience member described a German seniors' residence she had visited that was designed for "Living in Place." There, residents were able to move back and forth easily on the same floor, according to their state of health, between areas for independent living, light care, medium care and nursing care. Elizabeth agreed that this was an excellent model.
- ***Does Abbeyfield seek political support?*** Governments do assist, for instance, by donating land for Abbeyfield houses or providing subsidies. Local politicians can be helpful.
- ***Does Abbeyfield seek to partner with faith organizations?*** The churches are themselves under strain nowadays. As part of its new Strategic Plan, Abbeyfield Canada is looking to partner with such organizations as Habitat for Humanity, the Legion and aboriginal groups.

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