Environmental Design that Supports Healthy Aging: Evaluating a New Supportive Living Facility

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**Background**

In 2012, there were 430,000 seniors in Alberta and this was predicted to reach 700,000 by 2022 (Alberta Health, 2012). Population estimates predict that if this rate of growth continues, by 2031 approximately 1 in 5 Albertans will be a senior (Alberta Seniors and Community Supports, 2008). The province of Alberta developed a Continuing Care Strategy to respond to the rapidly increasing proportion of seniors (Alberta Health and Wellness, 2008). The strategy proposes an ‘aging in place’ approach to health care that includes increasing accommodation and service options.

Alberta’s continuing care facilities currently have a variety of accommodations. Supportive living facilities are accommodations for seniors with on-site support services designed to sustain independence. Seniors’ housing and service providers will need to continue increase infrastructure to support the growing population of seniors in Alberta. Facilities specifically designed for seniors can contribute to healthy aging of the population.

The Bethany Care Society provides health, housing, and community services for seniors and people with disabilities in over 100 communities across Alberta. In October 2010, the society opened a new supportive living facility in Red Deer, Alberta. Located on the Red Deer College Campus, CollegeSide Gardens was designed and marketed to seniors as an affordable accommodation option that supports an active retirement lifestyle in a community setting.

**Objectives**

This study set out to determine whether the physical design of a new supportive living facility meets the needs of its residents. The results of this work will be able to contribute to the development and assessment of supportive living environments.

Specific objectives of the project were as follows:

1. Evaluate resident satisfaction with a recently built supportive living facility.
2. Develop a tool to identify how attributes of supportive living environments contribute to healthy aging.

**Method**

Data for this study was collected using multiple methods:

1. Six residents participated in one-on-one interviews about the facility. They were asked why they initially selected the facility, what they like about the facility, and what would cause them to move. Information gathered from these interviews was used to update the existing supportive living satisfaction survey component used by the Bethany Care Society.
2. All residents were invited to participate in the Environmental Design Survey either independently or one-on-one with a researcher. The survey collected demographic and health information, and had 41 questions about resident satisfaction with various aspects of their environment, including building performance, resident attachment to the space, and resident satisfaction with services. A total of 49 out of 54 surveys were completed (a response rate of 91%).
Results
Some of the key findings were as follows:

- 65% of residents identified themselves as ‘healthy’ or ‘very healthy’
- 79% of residents reported that their health had either stayed the same or improved after moving into the supportive living facility
- 35% of residents reported falling before moving into the facility, and 31% reported falling after moving into the facility
- the physical environment received an average rating of 42.8 out of 48 which indicates residents have high overall satisfaction
- air quality and lighting received the lowest satisfaction scores
- residents rated the facility as highly accommodating of mobility equipment and devices (an average rating of 4.7 out of 5)
- residents who rated their overall health as higher tended to feel a stronger emotional attachment to the facility
- all residents surveyed reported that they were ‘very happy’ with their decision to live at the facility
- many residents reported having chosen the facility because their children live in the area (85% had children living in the area)

Conclusions
Moving into a care facility because of changes in health can be very significant for seniors and people with disabilities. Therefore, it is important to examine the role of supportive living for these populations. While some residents chose to move in because of their health, others wanted to be closer to family or a spouse in the nearby long-term care facility.

Home care assessments found that some current residents had increasing healthcare needs which will require them to move into an assisted living facility. Since residents reported high levels of satisfaction living at CollegeSide Gardens, this may lead to reluctance to move into a different environment with increased care services, which CollegeSide does not provide.

The reduction in falls noted in this evaluation suggests that the physical design of CollegeSide Gardens may reduce fall risk for some residents, which is a positive effect of the building design.

Future research should address how to best plan transitions in and out of supportive living facilities. There is currently little information about when and why residents transition to facilities with greater support.

Lessons Learned
We learned how a sense of place and place attachment offers valuable information about how the quality of supportive living facilities can contribute to healthy aging environments for seniors.

The full report can be found at www.mentalhealthresearch.ca

References

About the Author: Steven Friesen is a Quality Practice Leader with Bethany Care Society and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on the health system, specifically on the impact of environment design on health outcomes and service delivery across healthcare settings.