



POLICY BRIEF 2024

Enhancing Affordable Housing Options for Vancouver's Aging Population

Prisca Egbebiyi

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷə́yəm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) & *səlilwətaʔ* (Tsleil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

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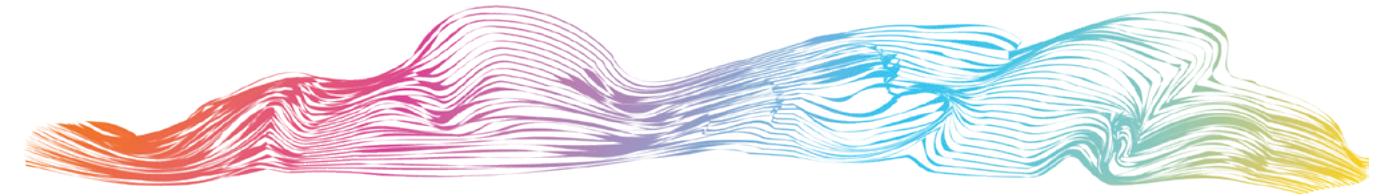
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HEADSHOT PHOTOGRAPHY

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About the LEVEL Initiative

LEVEL is a youth engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth populations in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL consists of three pillars of work to advance racial equity

1. LEVEL Youth Policy Program
2. LEVEL Youth Organizing
3. LEVEL BIPOC Granting

About the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized newcomer youth are dispropor-

tionately impacted by certain public policies but are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the *hə́ŋq* 'əmin 'əŋ-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the Halkomelem-speaking Tsleil-Waututh peoples, and of the *sníchim*-speaking *Sḵwx_wú7mesh* (Squamish) peoples.

1. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

Biography

Prisca Egbeyi



Prisca Egbeyi is a dedicated leader with a passion for community inclusion, leadership, and fostering equality and equity for all members of society. As a product of immigration, she possesses a deep understanding of the complex challenges faced by immigrants as they seek a better life in Canada. Prisca's commitment to social justice led her to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Criminology at Simon Fraser University (SFU), followed by over five years of experience working with women, children, and the elderly facing extreme poverty in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Through her work, Prisca has developed a strong understanding of the systemic issues contributing to poverty and inequality, and she is passionate about advocating for marginalized populations. Her experience has ignited a profound dedication to creating a more inclusive and equitable society where everyone feels valued, supported, and empowered through advocating for policies and projects that promote equality and inclusion for all members of society.



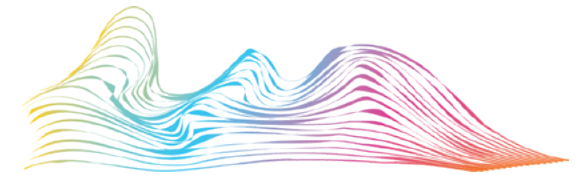
Executive Summary

Vancouver is facing a critical housing affordability crisis, acutely affecting the city's growing senior population.

The rising cost of living, coupled with stagnant or insufficient retirement incomes, has made it increasingly difficult for many seniors to secure safe, adequate, and affordable housing. This situation is exacerbated by the city's overreliance on Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units, particularly in the Downtown Eastside. These units, often plagued by poor living conditions, safety concerns, and a lack of essential support services, are disproportionately occupied by individuals facing homelessness, living with mental-health issues, struggling with substance use, or they are seniors who have few other affordable options.

Research has shown that a significant portion of Vancouver's seniors live on low incomes, with many relying on Old Age Security (OAS) and the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) as their primary sources of income. These benefits, while crucial, often fall short of covering the high costs of housing in the city. According to a 2023 report by the BC Non-Profit Housing Association (BCMPHA), the average rent for a bachelor apartment in Vancouver exceeds the maximum amount a senior on OAS and GIS would receive, leaving many seniors in a precarious financial situation.

The reliance on SROs as a housing solution for low-income individuals, specifically seniors, is not only inadequate but also detrimental to their well-being. A 2020 study by the Carnegie Community Action Project found that SROs in the Downtown Eastside are associated with high rates of poverty, social isolation,



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and health problems. Additionally, these units often lack accessibility features, making it difficult for seniors with mobility issues to live independently.

This policy proposal advocates for a paradigm shift in how Vancouver addresses the housing needs of its aging population. It recommends moving away from the reliance on SROs and investing in the development of affordable, accessible, and supportive housing options specifically designed for seniors. This includes increasing the supply of subsidized housing units, exploring innovative housing models such as "co-housing," enhancing rent supplements and subsidies, and collaborating with community organizations to provide essential support services. By implementing these recommendations, Vancouver can create a more-inclusive and equitable housing landscape for its seniors, ensuring that they can age with dignity, security, and access to the resources they need.

Background

Historically, Vancouver has heavily relied on SROs in the Downtown Eastside to house individuals experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty.

However, these units are often substandard, lacking in safety and support services, and unsuitable for long-term living, especially for elderly individuals. This policy proposes a shift away from SROs towards more-dignified and sustainable housing solutions for seniors.

The rising cost of living in Vancouver, coupled with inadequate retirement income for many seniors, has created a significant barrier to affordable housing. This policy seeks to address this issue by advocating for enhanced financial-aid programs and the development of housing options specifically designed to meet the financial realities of seniors on fixed incomes.

Having worked in the Downtown Eastside for over five years, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by seniors living in poverty and isolation. Many are forced to reside in unsafe SROs due to financial constraints,



Downtown Eastside, Vancouver. Photo by GoToVan, Wikimedia Commons.



This policy proposes a shift away from SROs towards more-dignified and sustainable housing solutions for seniors.

where they may experience abuse, neglect, and limited access to support services. This policy proposal is deeply personal to me, as I believe every senior deserves to age with dignity and security in a safe and supportive environment.

Proposal

Through extensive research and firsthand experience working with Vancouver's most-vulnerable seniors, I firmly believe that the following action plans are essential for addressing the city's affordable-housing crisis, and ensuring that our aging population can comfortably live and age with social inclusion, dignity and security:

1 Invest in Purpose-Built Senior Housing.

Vancouver must prioritize the development of new, purpose-built rental units specifically designed for seniors, with a variety of sizes to accommodate diverse needs. These units should be built with accessibility in mind, incorporating features like wider doorways, grab bars, and lever-style door handles to support seniors with mobility challenges. To maximize the impact of public investment, the city should leverage city-owned land and incentivize private developers to include affordable senior housing within market-rate developments. By investing in purpose-built housing, the city will ensure that there are more housing options for seniors, which will reduce extensive wait times for low-income housing.

2 Embrace Innovative Housing Solutions.

Vancouver must move beyond traditional housing models and explore innovative solutions that foster community and connection. Seniors are often left isolated, hidden from the eyes and ears of society. Co-housing communities, where seniors share resources and support each other, offer a promising avenue for combating social isolation and promoting well-being. Additionally, incentivizing the development of accessory dwelling units (ADUs) on existing properties can provide affordable housing options that allow seniors to age in place, remaining close to familiar surroundings and support networks. Community will create a sense of belonging and foster healthy relationships between seniors.

3 Enhance Financial Assistance for Seniors.

The financial realities faced by many seniors in Vancouver are stark. Fixed incomes from pensions, such as OAS and GIS, often fall significantly short of covering the soaring costs of housing and basic necessities. Many seniors, due to age or health conditions, are unable to work or supplement their income, further exacerbating their financial vulnerability. Even those with private retirement savings may find their life savings rapidly depleting in the face of Vancouver's high cost of living. To address this pressing issue, Vancouver must commit to a multi-faceted approach to enhance financial assistance for seniors.



THIS APPROACH INCLUDES:

1 Revising Rent Supplement Programs.

The city should regularly review and adjust rent supplement programs to ensure they keep pace with inflation and the rising cost of housing in Vancouver. Vancouver can consider indexing these programs to inflation to guarantee their continued effectiveness.

2 Expand Eligibility for Subsidies.

The city should broaden the eligibility criteria for rent subsidies to encompass a wider range of seniors, including those with moderate incomes who may still struggle to afford housing in the city. Vancouver should prioritize seniors with disabilities or chronic health conditions who may face additional financial burdens.

3 Property Tax Deferrals.

The city can expand and promote property tax deferral programs that allow seniors to defer property tax payments until they sell their homes or pass away, providing immediate financial relief for those struggling to make ends meet.

4 Explore Additional Financial Supports.

Vancouver should investigate the feasibility of providing additional financial support, such as grants for home repairs and adaptations, transportation subsidies, and assistance with utility bills. These targeted supports can help seniors maintain their independence and quality of life.

5 Foster Collaboration and Community Engagement.

To create lasting solutions that address the multifaceted needs of Vancouver's seniors, fostering collaboration and community engagement is essential. This involves not only partnering with external organizations and community groups but also creating spaces within affordable housing developments that actively encourage social interaction and a sense of belonging.



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VANCOUVER MUST:

1 Partner with Senior-Serving Organizations.

Collaborate with organizations specializing in senior care and housing to leverage their expertise and resources. These partnerships can help identify best practices, streamline service delivery, and ensure that seniors have access to comprehensive support.

2 Engage Community Groups.

Actively engage with community groups, seniors' organizations, and neighborhood associations to understand the unique challenges faced by seniors in different areas. This intentional engagement can inform targeted interventions and tailored solutions.

3 Develop Community-Based Resources.

Support the development of community-based resources, such as senior centers and community hubs, where seniors can access social activities, support services, and information about housing options specifically in and around the Downtown Eastside.

4 Create Social Spaces within Housing.

Integrate shared spaces into affordable-housing developments that are specifically designed to foster social interaction and community building. These spaces can include common rooms, gardens, fitness areas, or multi-purpose rooms that can be used for various activities and events. These social spaces not only enhance the quality of life for seniors but also promote a sense of belonging and connection within the community.

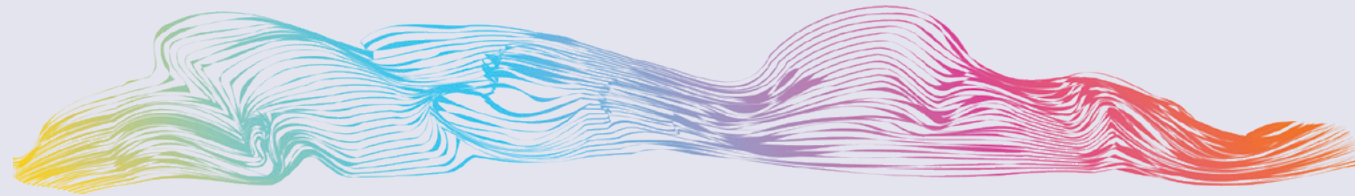
5 Prioritize Accessibility and Supportive Services.

Every senior deserves to live in a safe, accessible, and supportive environment. Vancouver must adopt universal design standards for all new and existing affordable-housing developments, ensuring that these units are accessible to people with a wide range of abilities. Integrating essential support services like homecare, meal programs, and transportation assistance directly into housing can empower seniors to live independently and maintain their quality of life. Regular accessibility audits of existing housing can help identify and address any barriers that may hinder seniors' ability to live comfortably and safely.



Every senior deserves to live in a safe, accessible, and supportive environment.

Conclusion



The challenges facing Vancouver's aging population are not mere statistics or abstract policy issues. They are the lived realities of our parents, grandparents, neighbors, and friends. Having witnessed the struggles of seniors in the Downtown Eastside firsthand, I know that safe, affordable, and accessible housing is not a luxury but a fundamental human right. It's about ensuring that those who have contributed so much to our city can age with dignity, security, and a sense of belonging.

This policy proposal is more than just a set of recommendations; it's a call to action. It's a plea to prioritize the well-being of our seniors and invest in their futures. By increasing the supply of purpose-built senior housing, embracing innovative models like co-housing, enhancing financial assistance programs, fostering collaboration, and prioritizing accessibility, we can create a Vancouver where all seniors have the opportunity to thrive instead of just waiting to age out of society.

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It's time for Vancouver to step up and fulfill its responsibility to its aging population. We have the resources, the expertise, and the compassion to make a real difference. Let's work together to build a city that truly values its seniors, one where everyone can age with grace, dignity, and a strong sense of community. The time for action is now.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This policy proposal is a testament to the resilience and strength of Vancouver's seniors, particularly those I've had the privilege of working with in the Downtown Eastside. Their stories of perseverance, despite facing immense challenges, have fueled my passion for advocating for their right to safe, affordable, and dignified housing.

I would like to acknowledge that this work was carried out on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. I recognize and respect the enduring relationship that Indigenous peoples have with these lands and waters.


I am deeply grateful to Vancouver Foundation and the LEVEL Youth Policy Project for providing me with this platform to share my vision for a more-inclusive and equitable city. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the mentors, facilitators, and fellow participants in the program for their guidance, support, and insightful discussions. Your collective knowledge and dedication to social change have been invaluable.

I am also indebted to the countless community organizations, advocates, and researchers who have tirelessly worked to address the housing crisis in Vancouver. Your tireless efforts have laid the groundwork for this proposal, and your continued advocacy gives me hope for a brighter future for our seniors.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the individuals and families who have shared their personal experiences with me. Your stories have informed my understanding of the complexities of housing insecurity and inspired me to fight for a city where everyone can thrive.

This proposal is dedicated to all Vancouver seniors, with the hope that it will contribute to creating a city where they can age with grace, dignity, and a strong sense of community.

To my grandmother; Nana, you were God's greatest gift to me. Your warmth, embrace, ease, and smile are the images flushing through my mind as I write away. You're always remembered, Nah.



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Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.

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