

Alberta Seniors Communities & Housing Association

Representing the seniors housing industry of Alberta for 50 years





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The Alberta Seniors Communities & Housing Association (ASCHA) has just celebrated its 50th anniversary of being the voice and champion of Alberta, Canada's seniors housing industry. ASCHA was founded in 1965, when several seniors' advocacy groups from different parts of the province came together to discuss the senior housing options in their communities. According to Irene Martin-Lindsay, current Executive Director of ASCHA, "the real driver was from the public housing side; the formation of the Lodge Program, which were then called 'Homes for the Aged.'"

In 1959, the Province introduced the Homes for the Aged Act, supporting the building of hundreds of low-cost retirement homes across Alberta. "So the Province started to build these lodges in partnership with the municipalities who donated the land, and for many years they split the deficits in two," Martin-Lindsay continues. "The intent of lodges was to keep people out of hospitals who just couldn't be at home because they couldn't safely manage in their own homes."

In 1994, all previous housing acts administered by

the Province of Alberta were repealed and replaced by the Alberta Housing Act. The seniors housing industry shifted dramatically, as did the structure and purpose of the ASCHA. “ASCHA has significantly changed because the industry and the sectors have changed,” explains Martin-Lindsay. “Now we have a lot more voluntary, not-for-profit, and private sectors. We’ve expanded our mandate to look at more than just lodges. We look at independent living and supportive living.”

At the same time, the organization, which had been run by volunteers for its first three decades, created its first formal, full-time staff. The Association also changed its name from the Alberta Senior Citizens’ Homes Association to the Alberta Senior Citizens’ Housing Association in 1996. Today, the change to Alberta Seniors Communities and Housing Association is meant to embrace one of ASCHA’s key philosophies, that of “Aging in Community,” where seniors live in age-friendly communities that provide integrated,

AT A GLANCE

WHO: The Alberta Senior Citizens’ Homes Association

WHAT: An advocacy and trade association representing the seniors housing industry in Alberta

WHERE: Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

WEBSITE: www.ascha.com

person-centered services and supports for an optimal quality of life.

The ASCHA represents over 30,000 seniors in Alberta, via its 100 member organizations. A regular member can be any congregate living setting that serves four







or more seniors, and, according to Martin-Lindsay, that includes “everything from small, personal care homes to large, few-hundred-unit sites. Some have all types of housing options on one site, others are singular. They’re rural, urban, big, medium, and small. It’s the full breadth and cross section of the seniors housing industry.” Corporate and Stakeholder Associate Members are also a vital part of the Association.

About 55 to 60 percent of regular members are in the category of supportive living. Supportive living provides accommodation in a home-like setting, where seniors can remain as independent as possible while they still have access to accommodation and services that meet their changing needs. “People don’t want to live in institutional, medical-model settings. In the last 10 to 15 years, we’ve seen a real insurgence of what’s called designated, supportive living. And what that entails is the delivery of health services to the senior’s residence, under contract with Alberta Health Services,” says Martin-Lindsay. ASCHA represents over 2500

designated, supportive living (DSL) units.

Martin-Lindsay explains that advocacy is the main reason why its members join the organization. “It’s the number one thing they want us to be working on, and as such, it really takes up the vast majority of our time – working to achieve the goals of government and membership in a way that works for membership and the seniors they serve. Certainly we have other services – education, best practices, an energy program, and other resources - but those are what I would call ‘value-adds.’ What the members are really looking for is a voice and we certainly have a strong history and a good reputation and that has served us very well.”

ASCHA recently developed what it calls its “Principled Advocacy Positions.” They are:

- Person-centered Housing - honors the individual’s needs, desires and choices to maintain and enjoy a wholesome, vibrant lifestyle.
- Housing First - Housing is the core need of individu-



als. Without community housing, supports and services are difficult to deliver and cannot guarantee a person's stability. Services and supports should follow the individual and respond to his/her unique needs and must be integrated to work effectively in serving all Albertans from birth to end of life.

- Albertans Have the Right to Age Well in Community - Aging is experienced differently and uniquely by individuals. The services and supports to age well, including communities having all housing options, must be consistent, equitable and accessible across the province. Communities understand their diverse populations and must have flexibility to respond to unique expectations and culture.

In order to realize these principles, ASCHA hopes to work with Alberta's government to build the first-ever,

provincial housing strategy, incorporating an overall approach to housing that is aligned with all other strategies, including homelessness, affordable housing, and continuing and dementia care. ASCHA believes that such a comprehensive provincial housing strategy will enable communities to plan effectively and predictably for their future housing needs based on the principle of a housing first model. In addition, a person-centered focus will allow choices for residents to age well in community.

ASCHA members take a very active part in the organization's committee structure and working groups in order to further its agenda. Various member-driven committees meet during the year. These committees include a Capital Development Planning Working Group, the Education and Best Practice Working



Group, the Sustainable Operational Models Working Group, and the Health Collaboration Working Group, and work to drive change and best practices within the industry. ASCHA's annual Convention and Trade show is the largest gathering of seniors housing leaders in western Canada. This past spring, 300 housing provider representatives were in attendance, as were 100 product and service providers.

Soon, over 20 percent of Alberta's population will be seniors, and Martin-Lindsay is looking ahead. "We need to look at how we serve the aging population differently," she states. "We need to look at aging in community. I see an expanding role for housing providers, being a bit more of the hub, and bringing together those that provide other services in their communities, whether it's meals on wheels, transportation, house-

keeping, you name it. Because their future customers are those who are now living in their own homes - lonely, isolated and often struggling, and at tremendous risk. So I also see an expanded role of reaching out, not just from a health perspective, but from a wellness perspective. And that's where we really need to be focusing our energies."

In representing Alberta's seniors and their housing providers for the past half century, ASCHA has also achieved what Martin-Lindsay claims to have been a major shift in the public's perception of seniors housing: "We've really changed the stigma from 'old folks homes' to a place where people can come and really live well."

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