

Aging Population Doesn't Mean More Care in CBRM

Cape Breton's continuing care sector is going to get much busier over the coming years as the region braces itself against an aging population. However, private-for-profit care home operators in the province say that unless the government is willing to subsidize client costs, they will not be setting up shop on the Island anytime in the near future.

"Like any business, it is a question of the bottom line," says Jason Shannon, vice-president and chief operating officer of Shannex. "We are studying our options in that region for a private care facility, but right now it appears that there isn't a big or affluent enough of a client base to make it profitable for companies like ours."

Shannon admits that, aside from area nursing homes, there are currently not a lot of living options for seniors in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality. "It is either that or home-based care," he says. "What we would like to offer older residents - assisted living - is a middle ground between the two."

Shannex currently operates five nursing homes and four retirement sites across Nova Scotia, including the government-subsidized Harbourstone Enhanced Care facility in Sydney which has 272 residents. The company also offers a variety of services for seniors still living at home.

Last December, the province awarded the firm contracts for 431 publically-funded, long-term care beds in nine communities. As part of the deal, Shannex will build and operate a new 36-bed public facility in Cape Breton.

The company also recently announced that it will be developing more of its "campus" style living complexes for seniors across Atlantic Canada. "These sites offer them the options of traditional retirement living, nursing care or special care depending upon their lifestyle wants and needs," adds Shannon. "Without government support though, these folks aren't going to have that choice in Cape Breton."

It is hoped that the development of more private-for-profit care facilities will help to ease the strain on a public health care system that is already buckling under the weight of an aging population. "We have the highest demographic of older residents in the country," says Pamela Hafey, communications advisor for the Nova Scotia Department of Health. "Much of that pressure is being felt in the smaller communities across the province."

In 2006, Nova Scotia released its Continuing Care Strategy, which studied the existing and projected long-term care situation in the province. "Cape Breton was identified as a high need area," adds Hafey. Over 700 Nova Scotians celebrate their 65th birthday every month. There are currently close to 140,000 seniors in the province, a figure that is expected to double by 2026. While the number of residents in the region under the age of 55 has decreased by 20% over the last decade – mostly due to lower birth rates and outmigration - the number of seniors over the age of 80 has increased by 3% annually, and is projected to top 6% by 2018.

In response, Nova Scotia has approved licenses for 125 new long-term care beds to be placed in the area over the next 10 years. Home care services, including oxygen, palliative care and peritoneal dialysis will also be expanded.

Along with the need for more government support, private-for-profit facilities also face the ongoing challenge of attracting and retaining a skilled work force. "We are doing everything that we can to keep filling this funnel," says Shannon. "Along with our own training centre that produces 10 students every few months, we have partnered with community colleges and business schools across the province to generate more programs and post-graduate employment opportunities."

By Steven Clare, the Nova Scotia Business Journal

Courtesy: <http://www.globalaging.org/health/world/2008/Nova.htm>