

**'We want to live in a community where we're welcome':  
Study shows LGBTQ+ seniors worry about housing discrimination  
- Calgary Herald, August 30, 2019**



As seniors, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, Rowena Williams and Donna Thorsten are no strangers to discrimination. The two pose for a photo in the East Village on Thursday, August 29, 2019. Brendan Miller/Postmedia

Rowena Williams has faced a considerable amount of adversity as an openly gay black woman living in Calgary. And if being an immigrant from Jamaica, who came out at 17 and whose father forced her to marry a man, wasn't enough, in October she will turn 60.

In August, Williams and some of her friends from the Rainbow Elders, a group for LGBTQ seniors who work to provide a safe space for the Calgary community, were on the cover of the Kerby Centre's newsletter.

"When the Kerby News came out for August some of the members of the East Village Seniors Association and steering committee saw my picture with my group and they said, 'wow, she's a lesbian? We don't need lesbians in this neighbourhood or this building.'"

Williams promptly scheduled a meeting with Calgary Housing. She said only two of the five women who made the discriminatory comments have admitted to saying it. “The other three don’t want anything to do with any part of this argument.”

“I want (Calgary) Housing to call a meeting with us so I can explain to the residents of my building who we are and what we’re doing for the community,” she said. “We’re not freaks ... we’re here to take seniors out of isolation and bring them back into the community.”

Though her story is unique, her struggles with housing as an LGBTQ senior are not.

A recent study, published by the SHARP Foundation in partnership with MRU, suggests seniors across the city are worried about being an open member of the LGBTQ community if they have to move to a long-term care or assisted-living facility.

The study, called Aging in the LGBTQ+ Community, was led by SHARP, a non-profit that provides housing, health care and support for members of the Calgary community with HIV or at risk of contracting HIV. It was funded by the Calgary Homeless Foundation, researched by MRU and supported by Habitus Collective, Rainbow Elders and the Centre for Sexuality. Conducted between January and March, data was collected in the form of an online survey that garnered 121 responses from residents of Calgary, Airdrie, Okotoks and Cochrane. The Calgary respondents represented 32 of 35 postal code prefixes across the city.

The majority of respondents, 56 per cent, were between 55 and 64 years of age, 24 per cent between 65 and 74, 15 per cent under 55 and five per cent over 75.

One of the more revealing findings from the study was responses from an open-ended question about concerns regarding moving into a seniors’ housing facility.

Respondents were primarily worried about “anti-gay residents,” “being disrespected for who I am,” and “insults and threats of violence” against them, just to name a few.

Statistically speaking, 12 per cent of respondents expressed they’ve had negative or very negative experiences of discrimination in their current housing situation. Twenty-two per cent and 31 per cent said they’ve had very positive and positive experiences respectively. The remaining 33 per cent responded neutrally.

When it comes to living in a long-term care facility, respondents said that respect for their partner to be their primary caregiver was what they placed the highest importance on at 92 per cent. Their second most important criteria, at 87 per cent, was being allowed to share a room with their partner, and 80 per cent said it’s very important that their relationship status is respected.

Overall, 77 per cent ranked continuing to live in their private residence as their No. 1 choice and 59 per cent placed living in a seniors’ care facility as their fifth, or last, choice for housing as they age.

A combined 73 per cent of respondents said they would prefer either strictly LGBTQ housing (16 per cent) or a housing community primarily for LGBTQ seniors but welcoming of friends and allies (57 per cent). The remaining 32 per cent said they would prefer a community for all gender and sexual orientations.



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Donna Thorsten, manager of the Rainbow Elders, said the group assisted with the study as consultants and distributed the survey in the hope that it will encourage more seniors' housing facilities to open up the conversation about LGBTQ discrimination in their organizations.

"We want to show them that we're not these aliens, we're just humans like them," she said. "We have the same health-care problems, we have the same socio-economical problems just like any other human being."

Thorsten said there is a "tool kit" that facilities can acquire to help staff and residents understand terminology, address their biases and learn about the difficulties and concerns that open LGBTQ seniors have when they need to move as they age.

"There was a study done by Eagle Canada (in 2017) that showed 52 per cent of LGBTQ seniors fear being forced back into the closet if they go into long-term care," she said. "We should have the opportunity to be ourselves no matter where we are and these places are our homes, so why in our new home that we have to be at do we have to be a different person?"

The Rainbow Elders have grown exponentially, from 18 members in 2018 to 57 members today. Thorsten says it shows there's a need for groups like this where advocating, connecting and strengthening are core values.

Thorsten said she's pleased to see Calgary making strides but that "we're so far behind it's a bit hard to play catch-up sometimes.

"People think that we're new and we're not new. We've always been here and so many of us haven't felt comfortable sticking our face out and saying who we are," Thorsten said. "We just want to be the same as everyone else and treated the same as every other senior; we just have a different sexual orientation, that's all."