In Winnipeg, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited (LGBT2SQ) aging seniors encounter interwoven systematic disadvantages and barriers when it comes to accessing affordable housing as they age. Out of necessity, many LGBT2SQ seniors “return to the closet” in the hopes of finding housing they can afford and in order to gain better treatment by staff, visitors and other residents. Focused LGBT2SQ senior affordable housing developments is a means to address the intersecting needs of LGBT2SQ seniors that is equitable, context specific, culturally appropriate, and inclusive.

Research Questions

1. What are some of the opportunities and challenges in developing affordable housing for LGBT2SQ seniors in Canada?
2. What lessons do precedents from other jurisdictions offer Winnipeg?

Case Study

Town Hall Apartments
Chicago, Illinois

- An example of modifying existing infrastructure for LGBTQ+ needs - the building was previously a neighbourhood police station
- There is one full-time case manager on-site that meets with all residents individually at least twice a month
- The current waitlist has over 475 applicants

Stonewall House
Brooklyn, New York City, New York

- Originated from a faith community due to the experience of a panhandler at the Spirit of the Lake United Church of Christ
- There are no age restrictions - 35% of the residents are new-comers from East Africa, some with families and children
- All group events and activities are led by the residents with the support of property management

Spirit on Lake Apartments
Minneapolis, Minnesota

- All suites are affordable, offered to those who are 42+ and have an income that is less than 80% of the area median income
- LGBTQ+ case management and support is offered through SAGE, a national organization focused on supporting LGBTQ+ older adults
- Programs are not only for residents - all ages and anyone in the community are welcome to take part in the daily activities, training and services

Findings

LGBT2SQ Population

1. Lack of Knowledge: The importance of knowledge and familiarity with the LGBT2SQ community to understanding the uniqueness of their needs. There is a significant lack of recognized data and information available.
2. Barriers to Access: LGBT2SQ people disproportionately represent those who fall through the cracks when trying to access social services. For the senior LGBT2SQ people, this becomes more of a concern as they have fewer social networks to assist them in finding affordable housing and staying housed.
3. Gaps: Lack of representation within the services themselves and within the educational system which is caused by the program services not having a baseline knowledge of the LGBT2SQ community, especially the individuals who identify within the T2SQ part of the acronym.
4. Focused service provision: LGBT2SQ-specific housing can offer a sense of community where residents have a better understanding of the needs and challenges of long-term care and medical needs. They are also better equipped to meet these needs than mainstream senior housing developments.

Housing Development

5. Knowledge, Evidence and Feasibility: There is a lack of data about the LGBT2SQ community. Without this information it is difficult to establish policies which accurately reflect the community.
6. Capacity: Non-profits are the main driver of the affordable housing developments. However, many need to partner with an organization which has the capacity to sustain the time and energy required to get a housing development started.
7. Funding: Rising costs within the construction industry can deter developers to take a risk on affordable housing for a more profitable development. Funding however, can entice developers to include affordable units into a project.
8. Responsibility: Is there a right answer to who is responsible for developing affordable housing? The governments need to be the ones responsible for getting the housing built by providing the funding but also should establish policies which would generate more affordable housing development by the non-profit sector.

Recommendations

Census framework. The national census should include a section to capture the demographics of LGBT2SQ people in Canada. This will allow for a better understanding of LGBT2SQ demographics and a better understanding of how many LGBT2SQ people are in need of affordable housing and how many are nearing or are over the age of 65 years.

Policy development. While there is a National Housing Strategy and it acknowledges significant data gaps with respect to LGBT2SQ, specific policy direction on how governments could better support the LGBT2SQ community would help drive programming.

Program development. There are funds dedicated for senior affordable housing within the National Housing Strategy, some of which The Government of Manitoba should allocate specifically towards the development of affordable facilities and services for LGBT2SQ seniors.

An active role for municipalities. Government alone cannot meet the growing need for affordable housing. The City of Winnipeg should donate and dispose of lands for the development of LGBT2SQ senior housing to experienced non-profit housing developers and providers to deliver and operate. The City can be a leader in facilitating affordable housing through this planning measure and receive increased tax revenue on lands which were otherwise exempt.

Feasibility study. Conducting a feasibility study to address questions of the need of LGBT2SQ senior affordable housing, what services are required, location, and the ratio of affordable to market units needed to be a sustainable development. The study should be conducted by an organization with ties to LGBT2SQ community the funding for this should come primarily from the city of province.

Conclusion

As the aging population diversifies, the response to care must follow. Older LGBT2SQ people require housing which is equitable, context specific, culturally appropriate, inclusive and caters to their intersecting needs. It is clear, there are many challenges facing the creation of LGBT2SQ senior housing, lack of data, funding shortfalls, and little interest from developers all threaten the future of the LGBT2SQ aging population. It is also clear that where there is a desire and intent, there are also many opportunities to create a flourishing community with the development of partnerships between financiers, developers and the LGBT2SQ community itself.