



More and more co-op members are choosing to age in place. Aging in place is a process that enables older members to remain in their homes for as long as possible. It can have substantial benefits for older members, their families and the wider co-op community. CHF Canada's work plan on aging in place includes illustrating the ways that co-ops can meet the needs of an aging population, for both existing co-op members who want to age in place, as well as future members.

# AGING IN PLACE

## Member Stories

### DONNA MCHUGH

Unified Saint John Housing Co-op, Saint John, NB

Donna McHugh doesn't plan to move out of Unified Saint John Co-op anytime soon. At 74, Donna still serves as a director of the board, and has played a key role in recent changes to the structure of the co-op. This year, she received an award for services to co-op housing in New Brunswick. "The co-op never fails to astonish me," she said. "It's nice to be recognized."

Donna and her husband John were camping 27 years ago when her son told her that he'd put in an application for the couple at the co-op. "I didn't know what co-ops were," she said, and she was pretty sure she didn't want to live in one. Now, she wouldn't leave. "As long as I'm able, and I still have all my faculties, and I can afford it, I'll stay. I'm secure here. I have friends, and I enjoy being here."


Donna's husband died just over a year ago. He was well-known in the co-op, an accomplished craftsman who was popular with children. "He was known as the Mayor of Elliott Row," she noted, then laughed. "I never had a title." Donna does find it lonely on her own—she was married for 54 years—but the co-op is home now. "I would rather be alone with my memories than somewhere without them."



Memories are not all she has made at the co-op. Donna has also made history. As a member of the steering committee that considered a merger of eight co-ops, she was instrumental in helping bring about Unified Saint John. “Honestly, when I first went into this project, I went in negatively,” she explained. “I didn’t like the idea and said to myself, ‘They’re going to have to sell me on this.’ But when I learned more about it, I could see the logic in amalgamating”

“Financially, it made a lot of sense. Small co-ops are not always able to get capital funding to do major repairs. We got four or five of our big projects done this fall. I put it to people this way: It’s like being in the Bay of Fundy. Would you rather be in a cruise ship or in a rowboat? It’s pretty rocky, and windy out there. Alone, you could drown.”

The amalgamation became official on January 1, 2016. One member from each of the smaller co-ops sits on the new Unified Saint John board. “It’s different,” said Donna. “It’s not as close-knit as it used to be, but financially, it’s stronger. We might need a person whose job it is to bring people together, to check in on people, and see how they’re doing.”

Donna works in a local market two days a week, and although she doesn’t drive, she finds it easy to take the bus or walk around uptown Saint John. “Co-op living has surprised me so much. The co-op’s really good to people, and it’s a safe place for people to bring up their kids. As long as you work with them, they’ll certainly work with you.” 



**JOHN MACLELLAN**  
**Manager, Western Manitoba**  
**Seniors Co-op, Brandon, MB**

Is managing a seniors housing co-op any different from managing other housing co-ops?

John MacLellan manages Western Manitoba Seniors Co-op in Brandon, Manitoba, an “equity” co-op completed in 2013 with 34 units and a phase two development of another 63 units underway.

If all units are filled with older co-op members on fixed incomes, how does the co-op handle a drop in a household’s income? “We’re lucky to have a rent supplement program from the province of Manitoba for six of our 34 units,” says John.


“The City of Brandon also bought the equity shares for three of our units, so we can house some very low income members in those units.”

Does housing seniors’ present additional duties for the co-op manager? John says making sure older members are doing okay is a sensitive matter, and honouring autonomy can be tricky. There’s no co-op policy or in-house service to ensure members are providing for themselves adequately. “We rely on the community and members’ families to make sure everything is okay,” says John. This challenge also reveals the benefits of living in a co-op as an older member—a ready-made community and shared experiences. Many members receive help from their neighbours for grocery shopping and rides to medical appointments.

For more information on this creative funding model for seniors housing, check out this project profile written for CMHC.

After Western Manitoba Seniors’ co-op was fully occupied, they still had over 100 people on their waiting list. So the co-op’s president Harvey Douglas, with the support of the co-op, submitted a proposal to develop another 63 suites on some nearby city-owned land. Their bid was successful, and construction will begin in October or November 2016. Several other provinces have already shown interest in this approach to community-oriented seniors housing.



CHF Canada’s Manitoba Program Manager Blair Hamilton says “There really isn’t any difference in terms of providing advice or services to a 55+ co-op versus other co-ops. One of the good things about a 55+/seniors co-op is that the members tend to have more time available to take on challenges and develop their co-op. Often you tend to see board members with a lifetime of experience to draw on, through their past work and volunteer experiences, that can contribute to the governance of the co-op. The trick is to keep all this time and experience focused on positive aspects of growing the co-operative, and Western Manitoba Seniors has done an excellent job in this regard.” 



**MARIA HAWKINS**  
Andy Andras Co-op Housing  
for Seniors, Ottawa, ON

Maria Hawkins, Ottawa's "Blues Lady" and a resident of Andy Andras Co-op Housing for Seniors, is a difficult woman to pin down for an interview. I finally caught up with her at Capital Fair's Special Needs Day, where she was belting out blues and rock'n'roll classics under the big top.


Hawkins is passionate about music, about working with youth and adults with disabilities, and about mentorship: she developed the Blues in the Schools program, has worked on anti-bullying initiatives, and works with the Musicability, an all-ages choir for people with disabilities, among many other projects. She's also a dedicated supporter of the co-op movement.

Hawkins has lived at Andy Andras Co-op for 10 months now. Four days after she moved into the co-op, she underwent corneal transplant surgery and was overwhelmed by the support of fellow members. Now that she's recovered, she's been busy helping out with the co-op's bylaw review and on its social committee.

"Being part of the co-op movement means belonging to something bigger and broader and more valuable than just yourself," she says, mentioning how much she appreciates how members at her co-op check in on one another, including visiting former members who have moved on to care facilities or to hospice.

About being a co-op member, she says, "Co- means we're in this together, today, tomorrow, always." The way she talks about co-op life echoes the way she talks about how she values performing for "the feeling of connection, the symbiotic feeling when you give the crowd energy and they give you energy."

Andy Andras Co-op supports its members' aging in place by fostering a supportive and active community with events such as weekly exercise classes and monthly birthday parties for members, and ensuring that members are provided with volunteer opportunities that reflect their abilities and interest. Coordinator Leah Raftis also makes sure to connect members in their families to resources available in the community, from Meals on Wheels to physiotherapy to the funeral co-op.

Maria Hawkins is currently at work on two albums of original material. You can hear her music at [www.mariahawkins.ca](http://www.mariahawkins.ca). 





**PROVIE DYCK**  
HW Flesher Housing Co-op,  
Vancouver, BC

Provie Dyck has lived at HW Flesher Housing Co-operative in Vancouver since 1991. She was widowed soon after moving into the co-op and has raised her youngest daughter there.

“I could have moved out and bought into the market after my husband passed away, but I love living in this community”. She said “out of the 100 units here, I had 99 people knocking on my door bringing me casseroles after my husband’s death. My neighbours also took my daughter to school.”

Three years ago, Provie had some serious health concerns. The extra driving that resulted from

Provie’s increased health needs, such as taking her to medical appointments, was adding extra stress to her family.


During her recovery, a three-bedroom unit became available at the co-op, says Provie. “I asked the membership committee if they would allow me to move into a three-bedroom unit, and invite my daughter and son-in-law to live with me. The membership committee approved the move, and the Board okayed a deviation from their over-housing policy” to allow Provie to move into the unit in advance of her daughter and son-in-law.

The household now pools their resources and shares expenses and household chores. “My daughter does the grocery shopping, and my son-in-law, who is a short order cook, does the cooking.”

Provie has grab bars installed in the bathroom, and has received approval to install a chair lift. “The co-op won’t pay for the lift, but there are grants out there for this, and someone in the co-op is applying for funding to have this done.”

HW Flesher members use social media as a communication tool. “If I need something done,” says Provie, “I can post on the Facebook page, and somebody will drop by or call me within an hour.” New technologies can minimize social isolation of all members, especially those with mobility or health issues.

Provie says “The co-op must look at seniors in a different way. Listen to us! We have years of experience. I’m not saying seniors are right, but we do have experience. Rely on those older members; they know more than you think!”

A creative and flexible board of directors, a caring community, minor physical upgrades, and communication tools have helped this co-op keep their older members engaged and contributing to their community. 



If you or your co-op has a story to share for CHF Canada’s Aging in Place profiles, please contact Emily Doyle at [edoyle@chfcanda.coop](mailto:edoyle@chfcanda.coop).