

# Abbeyfield Housing in Lakefield: A Community-University Research Project

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## Abstract

In an era of population aging, many other rural communities are investigating alternative living accommodations for older adults. Abbeyfield housing, a unique, non-profit, community-based communal-living model that includes private, independent living space geared towards middle income seniors, has been successful in various communities. However, before investing in developing non-profit retirement living complexes, and the social, voluntary-based infrastructure necessary to do so, thoroughly and accurately understanding the local population's needs and preferences is important in ensuring appropriate and effective retirement housing developments. Focusing on the small rural town of Lakefield, Ontario, this community-based research project examined the needs, preferences and attitudes of older adults and community members towards retirement living, to determine the feasibility of developing an Abbeyfield housing model. Mixed-method research, employing a focus group ( $n = 5$ ) and an online survey ( $n = 73$ ), identified themes of affordability, independence and loneliness as the major concerns and preferences of community members and various stakeholders. Implications and recommendations based on these findings for non-profit organizations and for rural communities and small towns interested in developing Abbeyfield or other rural communal retirement housing alternatives are discussed.

## Keywords

Co-housing — Seniors — Abbeyfield — Independence — depression — loneliness — Age-friendly communities — Lakefield

## 1. Introduction

Life expectancy has been climbing steadily since the early 1900's. In 1981, the average Canadian's life expectancy was 76, and as of 2006 it has risen to 85 (Chappell & Hollander, 2013). As of 2016, 16.5% of Canadians are adults over the age of 65, and 35.7% of these individuals are 'baby boomers' (Statistics Canada, 2016). Further, this percentage of older adults is anticipated to double over the next 25 years (Levasseur et al., 2017). The bottom line is that Canadians are living longer, and the baby boom generation is now reaching their sixties and seventies; thus, there will be a substantially larger population of older adults (Chappell & Hollander, 2013) needing more housing options and care than ever before. In addition to health concerns that can often come with aging, older adults may also worry about issues such as transportation, independence, housing availability, and loneliness.

Abbeyfield Housing aims to combat these housing issues that seniors may face, as they move towards retirement. It fits within the constructs of an age-friendly community model for retirement, and offers communal, 'family-style' living arrangements. It is geared towards individuals who fit within the middle-income bracket (individuals: \$23,350 - \$36,850; double income: \$62,000 - \$88,100) (Hodges & Brown, 2015), and is a more affordable option, at roughly \$1250-\$1500/month, than the majority of retirement housing choices. It includes a private bedroom/suite with a bathroom, meals, snacks, a

shared common space, kitchen, television room, and dining room, and an extra guest room for visitors. There is also a house coordinator that takes care of general daily tasks, shopping, and meal preparations, as well, general maintenance and yard work is taken care of by community volunteers. Lakefield is a small town, situated within Selwyn Township, and surrounded by large rural areas and farm land. It has a population of 2,753, and 905 of those individuals are aged 65+ (Statistics Canada, 2016). Lakefield is set up similar to many other small, rural, towns, with its amenities located in the downtown core, making it difficult for individuals who live outside of that area, and are no longer able to drive, to access things like groceries, pharmaceuticals, and community activities, without the help of friends or family. Considering its population, setting, and location, an Abbeyfield model of housing may be a beneficial fit for the aging community in this area. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to establish if there is a need/want for an Abbeyfield Housing initiative in Lakefield, ON.

## 2. Age-Friendly Communities

Interest in making communities age-friendly has grown in the last ten years, largely due to the World Health Organization (WHO) bringing attention to the concept (WHO, 2007; 2015) when it launched its Global Age-Friendly Cities Project in 2007 (Novek & Menec, 2014). An age-friendly commu-



**Figure 1.** Map of Lakefield Ontario with comparisons to nearby towns. (Google Maps, 2017)

nity is one in which the structures, policies, settings, and services allow individuals to age actively, which WHO defines in terms of health, security, and participation (2002). More specifically, an age-friendly community examines the availability and affordability aspects of the housing environment, access to social programs geared to seniors, and public spaces that are accessible (WHO, 2007). Simply put, an age-friendly environment may facilitate social connectivity and networks (Menec, 2017). Social connectivity encompasses four main components: creating social connections, empowerment, social influence, and access to material resources and services (Menec, 2017). Novek and Menec (2014) identified five components for an age-friendly community: accessible and affordable transportation, housing, health care, safety, and community involvement opportunities, and found that seniors were concerned about their lack of access to affordable housing and maintaining their independence. These were key components in overall satisfaction with participants' living environment.

### 3. Concerns Around Aging and Retirement

#### 3.1 Independence

Bacsu et al. (2014) found, in their research with older adults regarding aging in place, that having the ability to age in one's home or community was of importance to keeping one's independence. Independence is the ability to keep one's autonomy, have freedom over one's life, and live self-sufficiently (Bacsu et al., 2014). Novek and Menec (2014) found that older adults evaluated their physical environment for specific aspects that could either improve or depreciate their independence. For example, having the ability to access local spaces unassisted

was important for affirming seniors' independence, and small modifications to housing strongly enhanced independence (Novek & Menec, 2014). Thus, simply adding small features like an outdoor ramp to an entrance way and handle grips in washrooms for toilets and showers can strongly support peoples' feelings of self-sufficiency as they age (Novek & Menec, 2014). Fear of losing one's independence was also discussed within a social context, as individuals tend to fear that they may begin to feel like a burden to others when they must ask for help or assistance (Novek & Menec, 2014).

### 4. Depression

Depression among older adults is a prominent issue, can vary widely across individuals, and can be chronic or may come and go (Djernes, 2006). Even though it is treatable, the majority of older adults living in private households or institutions seem to be underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed, and therefore are not receiving proper treatment (Djernes, 2006). This could be because depression is commonly hidden within this population, and can often coexist with physical conditions, which usually are prioritized by both individuals and their doctors (Overend et al., 2015). The frequency of depression in older adults could, in part, be explained by the increase of social isolation and loneliness that can occur as they age, as there has been shown to be a strong correlation between loneliness and depression (Burholt & Sharf, 2014). It is important to note that not everyone who experiences depression is lonely, and not everyone who is lonely experiences depression (Koropecj-Cox, 1998, as cited in Burholt & Sharf, 2014).

### 5. Loneliness

Loneliness is another obstacle often experienced by retirees, as their friends, siblings, and parents pass, resulting in a continuously shrinking social network. Loneliness, defined as a lack of human intimacy experienced as unpleasant for the individual, is comprised of two dimensions, emotional and social isolation (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008), and can stem from a mismatch between an individual's actual and expected quality and frequency of social interactions (Burholt & Sharf, 2014). Wilby (2011) studied the contributions of social networks to overall well-being, and studies have shown that peers seem to make more important contributions than family members (Mendes de Leon, 2005; Osborn et al., 2003; Routasalo et al., 2006, as cited in Wilby, 2011). Specifically, connections with friends had a more positive impact on depressive symptoms and loneliness than did family members in older adults, especially those living in institutions (Mullins & Dugan, 1990, as cited in Wilby, 2011).

Golden et al. (2009)'s study of loneliness and social supports among 1299 older adults in Dublin found that social isolation accounted for 70% of the prevalence of depression, and that one quarter of the males, and 40% of the females experienced loneliness. Previous studies within a Western context have shown the prevalence of loneliness to range bet-

ween 25-45% (e.g., Holman & Furukawa, 2002; Lauder et al., 2004; Lindgren et al., 1994; Mullins et al., 1988; Routasalo et al., 2006, as cited in Golden et al., 2009). Given this consistently high prevalence, it is important to find ways to combat loneliness among older adults as they age.

Loneliness and social isolation can be exacerbated, in part, by transportation challenges presented by a person's geographic location. The rural population of older adults in Canada has been aging quicker than the urban population, as roughly 15% of the Canadian rural population is 65 and older (Dandy & Bollman, 2008, as cited in Bacsu et al., 2014). Rural areas tend to carry the assumption of a strong sense of community and social networks, however this is often a misconception, as many small towns can be characterized by dispersed settlements, social deprivation, uneven development, and an aging population, creating challenges for service provision (Skinner et al., 2008). Research has shown that older adults tend to draw from a range of sources for their care, and most rural care networks tend to be fairly small and can become overwhelmed, placing a greater burden on formal and informal caregiving networks (Keating et al., 2001, as cited in Skinner et al., 2008).

## 6. Current Retirement Housing Availability

While there has been an increase in retirement-focused housing, there is still a shortage of various forms of intermediate housing (Joseph & Fuller, 1991; Nicholson, 1987, as cited in Hallman & Joseph, 1997), especially in rural areas. These types of housing arrangements are geared towards older adults whose ability to stay in their community depends on limited levels of assistance with everyday tasks (Monk & Kaye, 1991, as cited in Hallman & Joseph, 1997). The Peterborough Council of Aging (PCOA) identified a need for more seniors' housing and has proposed specific activities like creating a feasibility study for building on-reserve seniors housing for the Hiawatha First Nation, supporting new development of supportive housing and co-housing options for seniors, and expansions and additional funding for long-term care facilities in the Peterborough area (PCOA, 2017). Finding reasonably priced retirement living is a concern for many seniors who feel that they have a limited selection of financially viable options (PCOA, 2017). The Peterborough area currently has 1062 units of affordable/social housing specifically for seniors, and the capacity for 1043 seniors in retirement residences (PCOA, 2015). Unlike social and affordable housing, which is regulated by the city and supplied as an aspect of social services, the retirement residences are not price-fixed. There are currently 27,040 seniors over the age of 65 living in Peterborough (Statistics Canada, 2016). If long-term care facility units are included, there is senior-specific space for only 8.5% of the 65+ population of Peterborough (PCOA, 2015). Though this research is focused on Lakefield, Peterborough is its nearest city. Limitations in Peterborough's retirement housing opti-

ons likely mean fewer options for seniors leaving Lakefield. However, there is a minimal amount of data on housing for Lakefield seniors, and the specific housing needs of seniors has not been systematically examined. A recent community meeting in Lakefield (held in July of 2017) opened the floor to conversations about the viability of communal living, and a nonprofit organization, Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield, has since developed, seeking to build an Abbeyfield home being built in Lakefield.

## 7. Abbeyfield Housing

The Abbeyfield model is characterized as congregate housing which is not institutional but can meet the specific needs of older adults through proper design of the physical space, along with the addition of supportive services (Hallman & Joseph, 1997). In Canada, roughly 800 communities have begun building age-friendly housing models (Levasseur et al., 2017), and 21 of those communities have developed an Abbeyfield model, which houses roughly 300 residents ("Abbeyfield Canada"). The original idea for an Abbeyfield Home started in the U.K. in 1956 after Richard Carr-Gomm recognized that many older adults lived alone and felt isolated in their communities. Carr-Gomm wanted to provide individuals with a safe and secure home that could foster support and friendship ("Abbeyfield Bristol"). Worldwide, there are roughly 9000 individuals living in 850 different Abbeyfield residences and this number is constantly increasing ("Abbeyfield Bristol"). Typically, an Abbeyfield Home can accommodate 12-15 individuals ("Abbeyfield Canada"), but can potentially house as many as 20, depending on the size of the home. Abbeyfield Homes are generally less expensive than the majority of retirement options and fills a gap in the system for middle-income seniors.

## 8. Methodology

The current study employed a mixed methods strategy, in which both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. This allowed for the collection of specific demographic data as well as participant insights and views on the proposed Abbeyfield Housing project.

### 8.1 Quantitative

#### 8.1.1 Measures

To determine whether the Lakefield community presents a feasible setting in which to develop Abbeyfield Housing, an online survey was developed, which was advertised and open to the community at large, with no exclusion criteria. Survey items included questions such as "In general, do you feel there is a sufficient selection of retirement homes/accommodation in Lakefield?", "What type of living environment would you prefer should you move into a retirement home?" and "What is your household income?" The survey sample allowed the researcher team to gauge seniors' income eligibility, and general community interest in Abbeyfield Housing. Participants in the

survey included seniors, relatives of seniors, and interested community members. The interested community member grouping was useful in gauging the future and sustainability of this type of senior living accommodation.

### 8.1.2 Procedure

The online survey was distributed to various members of the Lakefield community via email, sent by the community partner at the Abbeyfield Housing Society of Lakefield. In addition, a poster was created containing an online link to the survey and a QR code, as well as a phone number for those who wanted to complete the survey but did not have internet access; posters were distributed throughout Lakefield (e.g., in stores, restaurants, public buildings). There were also advertisements placed in the Lakefield Herald and The Peterborough Examiner, both local newspapers. Upon completion of the online survey, participants were given the option to provide their contact information if wished to participate in a follow-up focus group. These individuals were then contacted and invited to participate in the focus groups. Additional focus group recruitment was accomplished through an email sent out by the Abbeyfield Housing Society of Lakefield and through a community gathering held by the same organization.

### 8.1.3 Analysis

Demographic data was collected to determine interest of Abbeyfield Housing correlated to age and income. Specifically, regarding whether there was support from enough qualified seniors interested in the type of living accommodations Abbeyfield Housing offers. Descriptive data analysis was used to give a snapshot of income levels, thoughts on current housing availability and general interest/viability.

## 8.2 Qualitative

### 8.2.1 Measures

To provide an opportunity for discussion and to gain a broad range of perspectives on retirement in general, and on Abbeyfield Housing, a focus group was held. The focus group consisted of five individuals, lasted approximately 45 minutes, and was held at the Lakefield Public Library to provide a comfortable and familiar setting.

### 8.2.2 Analysis

A total of one (1) focus group has been conducted and was transcribed verbatim. An initial thematic analysis was conducted independently by each researcher by reviewing transcripts line-by-line and applying emerging themes and codes. Thematic content analysis was employed through several reviews of the transcripts and a constant comparative method was used to ensure connections between variables were noted, and latent and manifest content were observed. Fieldnotes taken during the focus groups were also used during the analysis. The analysis in this paper is preliminary, further thematic coding will be performed after more focus groups have been conducted.

**Table 1.** Age Demographics

	M	SD	N
Total	60.59	14.76	69
Near Retirement	66.82	8.37	35
Community Member	54.17	17.11	34

## 9. Results

A total of five individuals participated in the focus group, sharing their opinions and views on Abbeyfield Housing and retirement. A total of seventy-three individuals within the community completed the online survey. Overall, there was interest shown for an Abbeyfield house development in Lakefield by the focus group members, and many felt as though it could fill an important gap in retirement options for Lakefield.

Preliminary analysis of the transcripts brought forth some great insight. Some common themes included independence, a desire to live outside the institutional model, and accessibility in Lakefield. Independence meant something different to each of the focus group participants, and some noted a desire for autonomy. Other participants mentioned the importance of their pets, the choice to live in a beautiful place, and the freedom of driving as major points. One participant mentioned how a communal living style might help seniors maintain independence longer.

*[Y]ou've got all your marbles left, that you're more in control of what your living arrangements are like and not just like at the whim of you know someone else's idea of what you can or can't do today... maintain independence a little longer.*

- Female Participant, Focus Group One.

### 9.1 Descriptive Statistics

The average age of people that completed the survey was 61. Of those that said they were planning on retiring in the next 5-10 years, the average age was 70. Those that had a relative/friend that was near retiring but who were not considering retirement themselves had an average age of 49.6, ranging from 21-99 with a median age of 52. As expected, there was a slight skew to the data with more people over the average age completing the survey. Table 1 shows age demographics for the participants.

Income was an important aspect of the needs assessment, as Abbeyfield is best suited for middle income individuals. Survey results, regardless of age grouping, indicated that 50.7% of respondents identified as falling on, or below, the middle income cut off (Individual: \$23,350-\$36,850; Double Income: \$62,000-\$88,100) with only 5.7% of participants identifying as low income (Table 2). Of those participants that were of retirement age, income was related to their belief that Abbeyfield housing was financially feasible for them  $\chi^2(4, N=31) = 16.272, p < 0.05$ . The sample size for this test was small, however it is reasonable to believe that income would be related to fiscal viability.

**Table 2.** Income level as stratified by stage of retirement, Note: Income is defined as follows; **Low** (Individual: < \$18,700; Double Income: < \$38,800), **Lower-Middle** (Individual: \$18,700-\$23,350; Double Income: \$38,800-\$62,000), **Middle**: (Individual: \$23,350-\$36,850; Double Income: \$62,000-\$88,100), **Upper Middle** (Individual: \$36,850-\$55,500; Double Income: \$88,100-\$125,000), **High**: (Individual: > \$55,500; Double Income: > \$125,000)

Income Level	Total Sample (N = 69)		Near Retirement (N = 35)		Community Members (N = 34)	
Low	4	5.8%	2	5.7%	2	5.9%
Lower- Middle	13	18.8%	10	28.6%	3	8.8%
Middle	18	26.1%	8	22.9%	10	29.4%
Upper-Middle	13	18.8%	6	17.1%	7	20.6%
High	21	30.4	9	25.7%	12	35.3%

**Table 3.** Housing style preference as organized by income category: Housing style descriptions; 1: Private apartment, one bedroom including kitchenette and provided meals in shared dining room, 2: Private apartment, multiple bedrooms, including full kitchen, 3: Private bedroom and bathroom with shared living space & meals provided, 4: Private bedroom and bathroom, configured for partners, with a shared living space & meals provided, 5: Private apartment, multiple bedrooms, including kitchenette and provided meals in shared dining room, 6: Private apartment, one bedroom, including full kitchen.

Housing Style	High Income (N=8)	Middle-Upper Middle (N=14)	Low-Lower Middle (N=11)
1	2	1	4
2	4	4	1
3	0	1	1
4	0	3	1
5	0	1	1
6	0	3	3
Other	2	1	0

Financial viability is not the sole determinant of interest in Abbeyfield; a desire for communal housing as well as a relative independence is vital. Of future retirees, five participants responded that they were likely to retire in Lakefield, had a lower-upper middle income, were financially viable, and were unlikely to require advanced medical attention in their retirement. Eight individuals that identified as people who were friends/family of retirees indicated that they knew someone who would likely be a good fit for Abbeyfield. Just under 50% of upcoming retirees (15, N= 33) were comfortable with the idea of shared meals, but 7 participants specified a desire for a kitchenette within their private area. There was no significant relationship between income and style choice, style choice as organized by income is in Table 3. Medical needs were assessed by retirees; 19 stated that they were unlikely to require medical services above and beyond what they could access while in an Abbeyfield house, 11 indicated that they were unsure of what their needs would ultimately be, and 6 believed they would require more assistance. All but 6 respondents indicated a belief that there was not an adequate selection of retirement options. There was no visible relationship between any other variables and the beliefs about adequate housing options in Lakefield. Despite the wide belief that there was a lack of housing selection, many respondents indicated that they were fairly or very likely to retire in Lakefield.

## 10. Discussion

The most important finding of this study was the perceived lack of retirement housing in Lakefield. This opinion was

not limited to participants in the middle-income bracket that Abbeyfield is intended to cater to; high-income participants also identified a lack of selection. Despite the resounding response that Lakefield lacked retirement housing, most participants still wished to retire in Lakefield. If Lakefield is already lacking in housing availability and options, an influx of retirees to the area could additionally strain the system. Some focus groups were concerned about Lakefield’s ability to support such an influx, specifically related to medical care and accessibility. There is no hospital in Lakefield and limited clinic availability, which is often available only to those who have doctors in the town. Many seniors make the trip to Peterborough for appointments and tests. Though Abbeyfield is intended for more independent seniors, the ease of transport to these appointments should be considered in the design of the house. Ensuring that parking and a system of carpooling is available could mitigate this issue. Most retirees anticipated needing limited medical support, though a fair number also noted that they were unsure of what was to come. The issue of accessibility throughout Lakefield was brought up during focus groups, though Abbeyfield houses themselves are wheelchair/walker accessible, much of Lakefield is not. Having identified these issues, it is important that Abbeyfield Society of Lakefield consider the problems of retiring not only in terms of Abbeyfield but also in terms of Lakefield as a whole, as maintaining community connections is vital to reducing loneliness (Golden et al., 2009).

Overall, the relatively high survey participation could indicate that the town is at the very least intrigued by the idea of communal seniors’ living. Focus group findings concerned in-

dependence in communal living, particularly including shared dining rooms but also in-room kitchenettes. This demonstrates that some individuals see cooking and other aspects of home maintenance as a part of maintaining independence (e.g., Bacsu et al., 2014; Novek & Menec, 2014). Moving forward, kitchenettes could be considered in the planning of the house, or, ensuring unrestricted use of kitchen facilities, could improve interest in this initiative.

## 11. Limitations

Abbeyfield Housing requires that a house be built or renovated to align with the housing model to foster communal living while maintaining privacy. Construction projects take time to complete as the developers must obtain land, seek council approval, select contractors, and construct. As such, those that participated in focus groups who are near retirement may miss the opportunity to use Abbeyfield as it may not be built in time for them. Likewise, the preferences of individuals from different generations can change so there is the possibility that younger generations will have different interests that do not align with their older counterparts. Additionally, while the study provided detailed explanations of Abbeyfield Housing, for some participating in the survey, it may be difficult to envision living in this type of housing arrangement. This inability to easily visit an existing Abbeyfield house may impact enrolment in rooms by either exceeding or underwhelming participants expectations.

Lakefield is a unique community that has many desirable features which attract retirees. Its close proximity to the city of Peterborough, yet its small-town feel and scenic river views makes it particularly attractive to those seeking to live a relaxed retirement lifestyle. As such, Lakefield's population is changing, as people from the greater Toronto area are looking to buy property elsewhere in order to retire in a more affordable community. This phenomenon of greater Toronto area relocation could drive up housing costs in Lakefield, which may make Abbeyfield Housing more appealing for those with middle incomes. Simply put, those that responded with low interest in Abbeyfield may change their minds in the future as housing prices escalate. Additionally, no solicitation on opinions or views regarding retirement accommodations from the greater Toronto area population were collected.

Sample size was a barrier to inferential statistical analysis, though the overall sample was sizeable, the smaller subgroups did not yield enough data to draw significance. The descriptive results were still relevant, however a larger sample size, or one with less stratification of participants could have led to a better snapshot of the needs in Lakefield. However, as Lakefield is a small town and therefore did not have a large population to draw from, results still include a high percentage of participation among the potential retirement population.

## 12. Next Steps

Phase two of the study will be implemented within the next month, which will see three more focus groups being held at the Lakefield Legion, each consisting of four to six individuals. The participants will be recruited from the latest community meeting regarding the possibility of an Abbeyfield house development in Lakefield. Similar thematic content analyses will be employed, ensuring connections between variables are noted and latent and manifest content is observed. Data extracted from the second batch of focus groups will be amalgamated into the present data to give a more in-depth examination of the opinions and thoughts regarding retirement living in general, and about the Abbeyfield model of housing.

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