

Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI)

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Judy Blakely

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Dates: October 2005

Location: Hinton, AB

Index: Nurse manager; Comparison between Alberta and BC health care structure; Seniors health care; Working poor-Increasing cost of homes in relation to service sector wages; Strategies to help low income workers work cooperatively

I was born in Kitchener, Ontario educated as a nurse in Bellam, Ontario. [I] went from there to Victoria, BC and from there to Williams Lake, BC, then over to Hinton.

It was very comfortable for me. I was the manager, head nurse, at a 58 bed long term care facility. We weren't in any way attached to the acute care hospital, so we were self sufficient. We did have 22 seniors' apartments also on the same foyer. It was a transition time. I had 13 registered nurses working for me, but then a whole group of other people in other categories that were working together to keep the people in that particular facility for a long time before they had to go to extended care. In that province it's all under the health department, so there were a lot of rules and regulations that applied to acute care and long term care as well as to the level that I was doing, which was intermediate care, in between.

There is a difference between Alberta and British Columbia, in the fact that people that are not ready for extended care are still under the auspices of the health department.

Whereas here [Alberta] they're under housing, because we have seniors' houses, lodges, that's what I'm working in here. But over there you go from somebody who can live at

home with home care into what we call personal care. Then it was intermediate one, which required a little more care. Intermediate two required more than that. Intermediate three, and then you progressed into the long term care or extended care unit, at which time you probably totally dependent on services of a professional nature. But during this intermediate time, you're still out walking around. When you're in charge of a facility like this, you're looking at what size of shoes does this person need, and let's make sure they've got their hat and scarf on, going out on tours or shopping or this type of thing. Mainly what we did at that level was provide the food and the housekeeping and the warm beds and the medication, so people could cope. Some physical care, as it became intermediate two to three. Usually a lot of bathing and dressing and this type of thing. It was a transition time from being at home to being in the extended care unit.

In Alberta, you don't go under the health auspices until you are long term care, extended care. And prior to that you're under the Ministry of Housing, which is quite different than you'd find in a British Columbia system. Even in the staff, you find that the staff in British Columbia are wearing uniforms. The staff in housing, which is more geared toward being a residential setting,...provides basically the same kind of care, but different monies, different ways of dealing with it. So the girls aren't in uniform in a lot of cases. They're not in blue jeans, but ... they sort of represent more, "this is our home" rather than: this is an institution." Quite a difference!

Generally when you're into a seniors lodge it's PCAs, which is personal care attendants. They do receive some professional training, but they do not have the designation of the

LPN, [Licensed Practical Nurse] or in other provinces it's RNA, this type of thing. They do have some education, but not as elaborate. The other thing is that they're not doing hands on nursing care. They are the people who support everything else except for personal care, and then you have your LPNs and RNs coming in from home care services, which are community based nursing service run under the health units.

I've always worked in the government run public system. There certainly are private care facilities in both provinces. Some are not for profit, some are profit making. There's a variety out there, as there is in residential homes. In British Columbia you tended to find that if we didn't have enough room in our intermediate care in those facilities, that people were being paid to take residents in their home, often three or four seniors, and maintain them there until there was a bed in the facilities. There's a real combination. When you're taking people into your home, it's almost like a foster care system financially. Whereas in other cases it's, the government provides money no matter whether you are operating as a private not for profit, or a profit making. There's always some subsidization that you are eligible from the government to provide services. Because it's a lot more expensive to provide services for a person than anybody could pay out of their pocket.

I do want to make sure that the staffing is staying. As we find that we're progressing through a lot of these issues, costs seem to be a big factor. If costs are being taken up by staffing, you see some reduction in the staffing. We're already running, in a lot of cases that I've been involved with, right at the bottom level of how much staff there is. When the regulations say you can have one person on a night shift for x number of residents,

that's all you have. Cuz that's all you can afford to have. In a lot of cases, one person isn't enough. So we really have to have people that are committed to this type of work, because it is a 24-7 work. But we also have to have the means financially to be able to have these people in place. I think that's very important. The other thing that comes into play, especially if you're in a rural or outlying district, is you have to have the inspections. You have to have the accessibility to good food at a reasonable cost so you can keep your costs down, and again give the best service that you possibly can to the seniors.

Was staffing reduced?

Somewhat. I think maybe you would find that in your private and not for profit private homes. In a lot of cases it's become pretty difficult. But now there are more and more situations where staffing has been reduced. Staffing has been reduced from RNs to LPNs to PCAs. In a situation where you used to have an RN on the floor at all times 24-7, you now have an RN on call (that's not even in the building), that will come in. Or you have LPNs that'll come in to do specific services, not be there all the time. There's been quite a bit of downloading that I've seen over the last few years. It's really sort of a frightening trend more than being something that is an imminent danger. In most places, the residents are still cared for in the best way they can. The seniors are still given the attention they need. There are always some places and some situations that are not as good as others, but basically people are getting good care.

When I was in Victoria I had the opportunity of working in an extended care hospital, 75 people per unit. The unit that I was on, the people were all under 30 years of age. They

were ranging mainly from 18 to 30 [years]. [There were] a lot of car accidents, people with multiple sclerosis, people with Lou Gehrigs; a lot of things that were very traumatic. These young people did get what they needed physically to be supportive of their life, but how many 25 year olds were getting the extra time to still be part of the community, or even understand what was going on in the newspaper. If you have a disability that will not allow you to communicate, then you have to have somebody there that can do that. In a lot of cases, because of the shortage or burnout of volunteers, that couldn't happen. That was really not good.

What issues are of concern?

Seniors' housing in particular, but affordable housing even more so. When you take a look at it, a lot of seniors are candidates for affordable housing. In areas where we're in right now in Alberta, we have a very fast paced high economy, and everything is extremely expensive. The people that are marginalized or left out seem to be an awful lot of seniors and those that are working at the minimum level of wages. So these are my concerns to try to get innovative ways of helping these people, not only have a roof over their head, but also to have some kind of quality place to stay and maintain the rest of their life, and to be able to function as part of the mainstream of the communities that we live in. It's a very difficult process.

I can't say that for certain, because I really do not know. I do know that the monies that are out there don't seem to be going as far as they used to be able to. Something you could purchase and live in and have a comfortable existence in some places is buying you or allowing you to be in a situation that is not quite as comfortable. I'm not sure where the

gap is. But I do believe that it is a partnership thing that we have to work at it. Yes, there are responsibilities for the federal government. There also is for the provincial, and probably the municipalities too. In the situation where we are, in the municipality right now, we do get money from every taxpayer in communities we run seniors lodges in, to help support what is going on for our seniors. That is still happening. But in a lot of cases it's getting tight on communities. People don't want to have it on their tax rolls that more and more money is being taken off for seniors' housing. It's like a snowball effect. If you don't have the money, you can't provide what you used to provide.

It's really interesting that you mention that. I've just come back from Regina. We were at a sustainable communities conference for a couple of days. It was just a myriad of people from across the country, looking at ways of addressing some of these needs. For instance, in Saskatoon they've now developed some co-ops so people can get money for mortgages. If you've got a net pay of less than \$20,000 per year, you don't qualify for a mortgage. But if you're in with another 30 families of all ages and outlooks, as a co-op, which you sign and become part of this, then you're more eligible to get some monies for mortgages to actually buy a house. It's very difficult when we hear about families, say in Winnipeg, who are in transitional housing for three or four years. Some of these other opportunities have to come in place. If you don't have a house, you don't really want to make friends, because you don't know how long you're going to be there. The kids really don't want to do well in school, because they don't know how long they're going to be there. It just has a real rippling effect all the way down. When it comes to seniors, the same type of thing happens. If you're always concerned about where you're going to be

living the next day and where your next meal's coming from, and all the basic Maslow things, then the quality of your life is not something you can concentrate on. But there are communities, such as Vancouver, Saskatoon, and like I said we've heard from others across country, that are trying to address this in very innovative ways. Each way seems to be different. A little more input from a different source, or trying to get the communities to come together in a different way to provide some of these essentials. Kitchens, community kitchens, where people can go together and make meals. The food is cheaper cuz they're doing it together. They take home 7 meals. It's just one of the ways that they're doing it. So there are some good things out there too.

I think you're right on that. Maybe part of the issue to think about is that all of a sudden these communities have changed overnight. It's been very quick. For people to catch up and have the direction and the insight and the programs in place has not been nearly as fast as we've been able to have people move in with oil and gas and lots of money. So you're very right. It not only affects the seniors and those who are on some kind of financial assistance already, it's not affecting your working poor, and probably most of the working poor. We need to have people that are doing the service jobs. Service jobs, as you know, are not paying a lot per hour. Yet you can have two people right now that are out there making minimum wage, who cannot afford a house or an apartment or anything to rent, even if it was available, which in a lot of cases it isn't. That didn't happen five or six years ago in these communities. If you had at minimum wage and you had one that was making a dollar or two more an hour, they still had the opportunity of getting into something that they could call home. This is fleeting, it's gone.

You're probably right to a certain extent. I do feel that there is some responsibility there. But then you have to consider who the government is and where the money comes from. So that puts it back on the taxpayers and the municipalities. So I think that we're all partners in this. It's probably a wakeup call that none of us have had to meet before. Now all of a sudden we have to think, are we our brother's keepers? Or do we say, well why did they come to this community if there wasn't a house anyway? I think there are a lot of issues that have to be dealt that way, and certainly government has to be involved. But I'm not so sure that it's a total responsibility of the provincial government, as we see it.

I think when you're involved in any political issue, you've made an agreement with the taxpayers that you're going to take a leadership role, and that you're going to be the one who spends the extra time investigating or trying to put ideas together to address some of these issues. Yes, I take that very seriously. I do feel that as a politician, I have the responsibility to deal in different departments and with different people that the person that's walking down the street doesn't have that opportunity. It's very much an issue of the politician being involved. It's also very much an issue of other people within the community being involved. We're all working here together. When you get calls on a regular basis, and I'm not saying daily, but if you're getting calls of people living in vans on the streets and living in tents in the campground, let's date this. We're now into the end of October, it's pretty cold out there. So do children who are living in a van or a tent, do they have the proper breakfast to go to school to learn, etc.? You can't marginalize anybody within your community. This is the community that have put you in a position

of trust and a position of being able to be able to talk to people that they may not be able to. It's something that I try to work on as much as I can.

For politics? I had been involved so much, both in BC as well as Alberta, on a volunteer basis. I had been with FCSS and Municipal Planning here in Hinton since 1993 since I first came over here.

Interviewer: What's FCSS?

It's Family and Community Support Services. There again, that's part of most municipalities' mandate. In BC it was the family division. So I've always had a soft spot for dealing with people and being a representative to people. I also felt that I had a lot that I needed to give back to the community that had given me a lot, in the way of being supportive of my family. I have grandchildren who play hockey; I have other family members who have found Hinton to be home. It's part of the responsibility to give back, when you've been given to. It's been exciting for me. It's a whole different level of taking what I know about people into the political realm, so now we can find some other solutions.

I think we're closest to people on the municipal level, and I feel very comfortable with it.

Very much so. It's very exciting. As you know, I'm the only woman with these other gentlemen that are there, and it's the 2nd term. To see that everybody has their own background and their own agenda. But when we come together and we're working on something, we work as a team. When we make a decision based on input from the community, we go with it. There's no varying from that. There's nobody who sits back

and doesn't participate or have some input into that. It's a very exciting time for us. We have a real range of ages on council right now, and I think that too is very stimulating. We learn from each other all the time.

That happened somewhat in this community. We're part of a region. When you were talking about Glen, he's involved in the Evergreens Foundation Board, which I used to be on and now he is because I'm working for Evergreens. We've just done this for Grande Cache too, which is an industrialized town that was really feeling the hurting pain of having their industry leave, and didn't know if their hospital was going to become a first aid station. So we worked together with the Evergreens board and decided to put our seniors' lodge, which was already slated to go in there, onto the hospital. That has allowed us to do some partnerships with the health region as well as with the hospital staff, to keep it alive and thriving on both sides. So that community now has all levels of care, whereas before they would've perhaps had to travel an hour and a half either way to get services beyond your first aid. So it's been good. The same type of thing has happened in other communities. We've done this in Evansburg also. In that partnership we also have the doctor's clinic in there, we have physio in there, we have a lot of things. So the same type of people, because we are rural, and this makes a difference. You have to think of different solutions than you do in the big cities like Edmonton and Calgary, because you don't have all the different facilities to get services from.

Evergreens Foundation is a non profit foundation who owns and operates on behalf of the provincial government seniors lodges. We have a lodge in Evansburg, and we have one in

Edson, which is our oldest one. In fact the building is still owned by the government when they used to own long term care facilities. We have a lodge here in Hinton, and we have a brand new one that just opened up in June in Grande Cache. Our mandated area is right to the BC border, so the next one to be built and operated will be in Jasper.

The board consists of representatives from the different municipalities. The taxpayers in all those communities have mandated to support us financially. So we go from community to community, but all the monies that have been collected were with one lodge. Then as the lodges were built, they spread out.

I'm not sure. I've always been a very busy person. I have a background in business too, as far as owning and operating businesses. So I've got a bird's eye view on a lot of bits and pieces of the community I live in now, and the region that I live in now. I firmly believe in partnerships. I like what's happening when you work together.

[end]