

# Supporting Equity & Diversity in Seniors Housing

A focus on support  
needs of seniors with  
limited English  
proficiency

Seong-gee Um, PhD

[seonggee@wellesleyinstitute.com](mailto:seonggee@wellesleyinstitute.com)

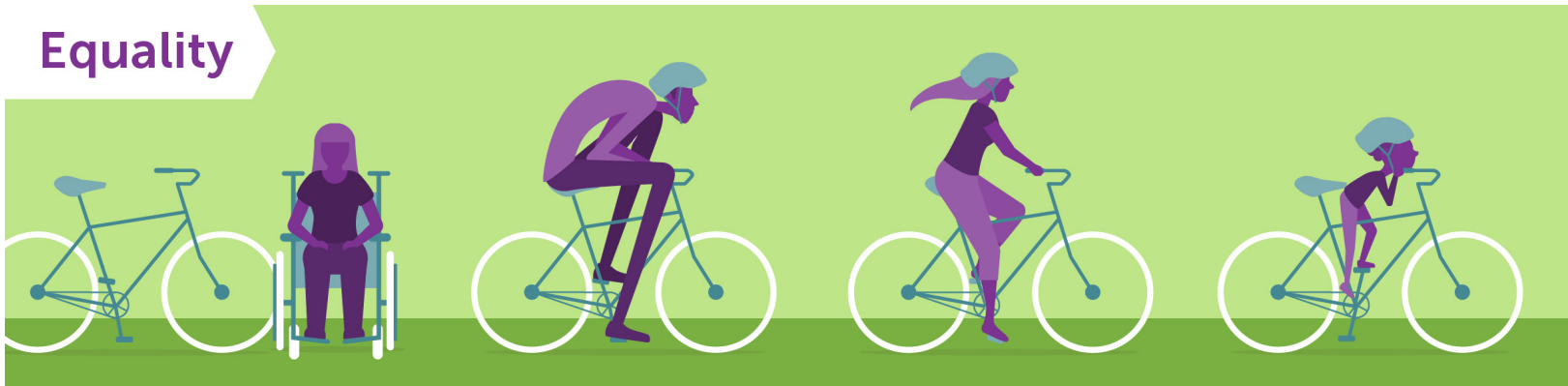


# Introduction

- **Wellesley Institute** works in research and policy to improve health and **health equity** through action on the social determinants of health.
- Project Lead: *Seniors, Aging, & Equity*  
(can be downloaded from: [www.wellesleyinstitute.com](http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com))
  - The Cost of Waiting for Long-Term Care (2021)
  - International Review of Seniors Strategies that Support Ethno-cultural and Linguistic Diversity (2020)
  - The Changing Face of Home and Community Care (2019)
  - Seniors Health in the GTA: How Immigration, Language, and Racialization Impact Seniors' Health (2017)
  - Home Care Access for Diverse Senior Populations (2016)

# Health Equity

## Equality



## Equity



From: [RWJF](#)

# A Health Equity Approach

(RWJF, 2017)

- Achieving health equity requires actions to increase opportunities to be as healthy as possible. That requires improving access to the conditions and resources that strongly influence health (e.g., safe housing, good physical and social environments, high-quality health care, good jobs, etc.)
- The gaps can be closed by making special efforts to improve the health of excluded or marginalized groups, not by worsening the health of those who are better off.

# What does this mean for seniors with limited English proficiency (LEP)?

- Language barriers to access needed supports
  - e.g., Seniors with non-English mother tongue were less likely than those with English mother tongue to receive government-funded home care (Um & Lightman, 2016)
- Health disparities
  - e.g., Seniors with non-English mother tongue reported poorer self-reported health and mental health (Um & Lightman, 2017)
- Language supports to improve outcomes
  - e.g., Language interpretation services can have a measurable impact on the clinical and patient outcomes (Laher et al., 2018)

A Qualitative Study:  
Language Barriers among Senior Tenants  
with LEP Living in Toronto's Social Housing

# Our Team:

- As part of a collaborative project on [Supporting the Integrated Service Model for Seniors Housing](#), funded by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- Led by Dr. Sander Hitzig of Sunnybrook Research Institute (with Dr. Christine Sheppard and Sarah Gould) & Andrea Austen of the City of Toronto
- WI researchers: Dr. Brenda Roche, Dr. Seong-gee Um, & Thrmiga Sathiyamoorthy
  - Focusing on Support Needs to Address:
    - Language Barriers
    - Eviction Prevention

# Seniors living in TCHC buildings

- Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) is the largest social housing provider in Canada
- Over 28,000 seniors (59+) living in TCHC buildings, and half live in one of 83 seniors-designated buildings
- Many facing challenges including poor health, mobility issues, social isolation, and cognitive impairment + racialized and gender-based poverty, racism, and unequal access to supports ([City of Toronto, 2020](#))
- For tenants not speaking English fluently, **language barriers** could add another layer of complexity in accessing supports they need to age in place



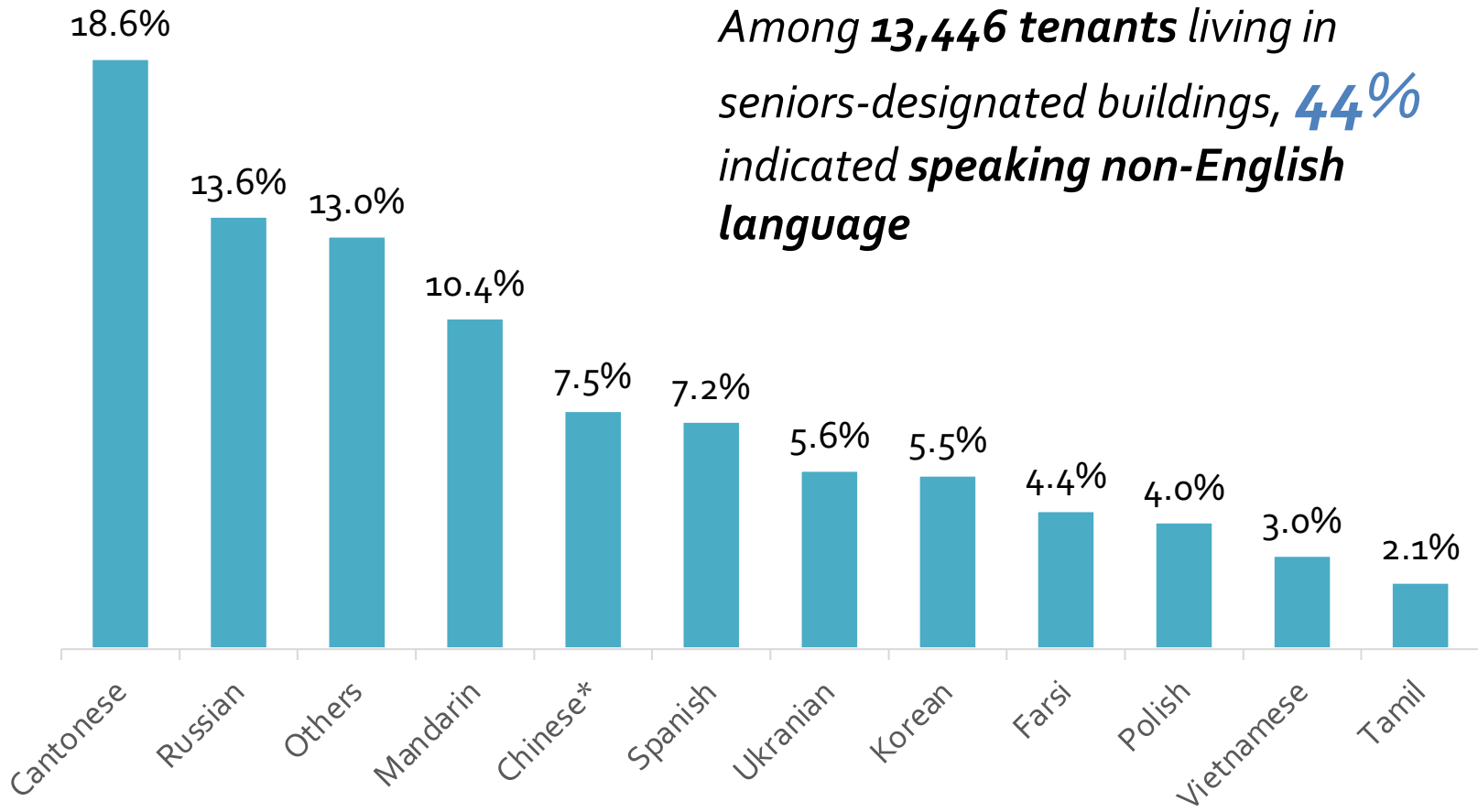
# Objectives:

- To identify main language barriers experienced by senior tenants in accessing support to age in place
- To provide policy suggestions to address language barriers
  - To inform the City's work on implementing a new housing services model (Integrated Services Model) to better support seniors successfully maintain their tenancy and age in social housing with dignity, comfort, and supports

# Methods

- Qualitative interviews and focus groups
  - 58 senior tenants living in Toronto Community Housing buildings, including:
    - 14 Chinese-speaking tenants
    - 3 Tamil-speaking tenants
  - 58 professionals representing 17 agencies from a variety of sectors, including community support services, primary care, and housing
- Descriptive analysis of tenants language data
- Thematic data analysis

# Linguistic Diversity of Senior Tenants



Data: TCHC Tenant Management System

# 1. Accessing housing info

## 1.1. Barriers to access information about building

- Access to housing information affecting tenant's daily life (e.g., unit maintenance, power outages, community engagement) is important, yet notices, announcements, and talks are mostly delivered only in English

*“Sometimes they would send us **notices about things like water or power outages. . .But they are all in English.** Most of the people living here are Chinese old ladies. . .Just like the PA announcements. **We don't understand.**” (Mandarin-speaking tenant)*

# 1. Accessing housing info (cont.)

## 1.2. Barriers to access information about tenancy

Tenants with LEP experienced challenges when dealing with tenancy-related matters, such as filling out annual review forms, submitting required documents, and following up with housing staff about their rent payment.

*“there was a sign next to the elevator about completing your [annual] review, because someone is coming. But if you can’t read English, how would you know this review was being done today?”  
(Care coordinator)*

*“Because it [the lease] is in English. . .we can’t read it. (...) I don't understand anything they send us. Sometimes that does hold things up.” (Mandarin-speaking tenant)*

## 2. Communicating with housing staff

- Limited access to formal interpretation/translation support or bilingual staff created communication challenges between staff and tenants

*“On the first Tuesday of every month, somebody from management would come to this building to deal with the problems old people have. **The problem of the problem is that she speaks English.** We Chinese have no way to communicate with her.” (Mandarin-speaking tenant)*

### 3. Communicating through informal support

- Tenants with LEP often sought help from their informal networks (family, friends, neighbours) to understand English messages and communicate with staff. Yet, such informal support often came with challenges.

*“[Wife] We **have to bother other people to help us.** But this [neighbour] is really nice. He is a great help to the Chinese here. . .[Husband] His English is very good, but his Chinese is. . .a lot of times, he fails to convey his ideas correctly. [...] **Our communication still does not go very smoothly.**”  
(Mandarin-speaking tenant couple)*

*“A lot of seniors live by themselves and have language barriers. **It would be best if their families can help them, but I know a lot of them don’t have such luxury.**” (Male tenant who has lived with his Cantonese-speaking mother)*

## 4. Accessing health care and other community supports

- Tenants and professionals reported that language barriers significantly affected seniors' use of health services and other community supports.

*“And they need to fix that [lack of communication support], because my Korean client does not want to go to the hospital because she says when she goes there, there is nobody to follow her, they just put her in a corner and nobody talks to her, because they don't speak Korean.” (supportive housing staff)*



# These language barriers are making senior tenants feel...

- Frustrated, excluded, and disempowered:  
*"if my fridge is not working, it's not cooling... I ask my kid to write a note to the office to make arrangements. . . if you have someone who speaks Chinese it would save us a lot of trouble... No need to bother our kid."*
- Concerned about safety around the building:  
*"If you have to make a PA announcement, it must be an emergency situation. They're all in English. . . We don't understand!. . .[I] just ignore them! [laughter] What can you do?"*
- Discouraged from using available health care and other supports

# Improving supports for senior tenants with LEP through:

- Enhancing data collection and utilization of tenants' language of preference
- Developing strategies to provide proactive, effective language access services
- Providing enhanced staff training
- Proactively sharing information in the language tenants speak
- Facilitating engagement with senior tenants with LEP in the service monitoring and evaluation

# Promoting Health Equity in Seniors Housing



From: [Wellesley Institute](https://www.wellesleyinstitute.org/)