

Pharmacy boosts long-term plan

Owning and operating a drug store may not seem like a typical business for a social housing organization, but for Namerind Housing Corp. it makes perfect sense.

"At Namerind, we're not only concerned with providing affordable housing for our community," said Michael Laliberte, president of Namerind Housing Corp. "We're also focused on providing opportunities for economic development and the sustainability of our organization."

Winnipeg Street Pharmacy, which officially opened its doors at 1106A Winnipeg St. Thursday, fulfills the latter part of Namerind's mandate.

"It's a part of our sustainability strategy," said Robert Byers, CEO of Namerind, which was created in 1977 to provide safe, affordable housing for Regina's aboriginal community.

While Namerind was founded with grants from various levels of government, those funding agreements are expiring, requiring Namerind to find its own source of funds.

"As these agreements come to an end, we don't get that subsidy anymore. But it doesn't mean people don't need affordable housing. (The need) is increasing, if anything," Byers said, adding Namerind has more than 600 people on its waiting list for affordable housing.

"So we thought, we have to develop a business model and we have to generate the funds that we no longer receive from government."

To that end, Namerind has expanded and diversified its holdings beyond the 285 homes it rents to about 2,000 First Nations and Métis people in the city.

About two years ago, Namerind opened the Resting Place, an aboriginal patients' lodge, which provides rental units to people undergoing medical treatment, as well as family members and caregivers,

Namerind also sold some of its housing stock and bought a warehouse for its contractors and tradespeople. Then a retail mall came available near Namerind's offices at 1121 Winnipeg St..

"Our anchor tenant is the (Regina) Community Clinic. Beside the clinic was an empty space. We thought, why isn't there a pharmacy there?"

With help from retired pharmacist Dean Ast, Namerind set about hiring a professional pharmacist, Bev Brooks, to manage the pharmacy and getting the required approvals from various regulatory agencies.

Of course, owning and operating the pharmacy is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Winnipeg Street Pharmacy will not only provide service to the aboriginal community, but provide revenues to support social housing for that community.

"What sets this project apart from other pharmacies is that 100 per cent of profits from this location will be reinvested through Namerind in providing affordable housing to the aboriginal community in Regina," Laliberte said.

Glen Pratt, third vice-chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), praised Namerind as a model of what aboriginal people can do -- with or without government help.

"Today is an example of what can be done when we put our heads together and branch out to create a sustainable organization. (Namerind) isn't just dependent on government funds, but in fact is generating its own funds."

For example, Byers said Namerind will take possession of a 22-suite apartment building on Oct. 1. "That isn't going to be affordable housing; it's going to be part of the sustainability strategy."