

## INITIATIVES TO MAINTAIN ROOMING HOUSE / SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY STOCK AND STABILIZE TENANCIES

### Introduction

Outside of social housing, rooming houses and single room occupancy (SRO) units are the least expensive form of permanent housing, and essential for very low-income single people. The CMHC study *Regulatory Factors in the Retention and Expansion of Rooming House Stock* (2000) provided information on a number of strategies to stabilize the rooming house stock, which is under constant threat from a variety of forces.

This study looked at other approaches to conserving rooming house and SRO stock and stabilizing tenancies. A range of initiatives was addressed in seven case studies involving:

- conflict reduction,
- public education,
- community development,
- building construction and,
- supportive housing.

Strong landlord-tenant and tenant-tenant relationships have many benefits. These include enhanced retention as well as expansion of rooming house stock, awareness of legal rights and responsibilities, and good building maintenance. Involvement of both landlords and tenants in the planning and development process avoids future conflicts. In addition, public education and information are essential to the successful retention and development of rooming house stock. A proactive approach involving stakeholders such as neighbours, tenants, politicians and developers can avoid not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) attitudes. Locally-based, non-profit, volunteer community organizations can build partnerships and alliances around rooming houses and SROs because then, risks, rewards and the expertise of all parties are shared. Flexible building codes and zoning by-laws are also important. Providing a one-window approach for owners to legalize

unregistered buildings encourages retention, upgrading, tenant safety and lower rents. Supportive housing provides a "continuum of care" for dependent tenants to have safe, affordable housing and to reduce their hospital emergency and service agency visits.

### Case Study A: Co-ordinated Crisis Response – City of Toronto Rental Housing Office

The City of Toronto's Rental Housing Office (RHO) was established in January 2000 and funded by the City to address one of the eight recommendations of the Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness: the lack of a comprehensive housing information system. With both telephone and Web site access, the RHO focus is on serving key stakeholders already providing information, advice and support to tenants and landlords including three agencies involved with rooming houses. The RHO does not duplicate existing community housing and legal services but provides referrals and facilitates information exchange on the prevention of tenant eviction.

As the facilitator for a network of agencies and a forum for stakeholder discussion, the RHO provides:

- 1) coordination among information providers such as the Rental Housing Advisory Committee;
- 2) communication and dissemination of a Referral List of Information and Advisory Services for Tenants and Landlords;
- 3) research and monitoring of housing trends and legislation for policy recommendations to City Council and;
- 4) direction



of special projects such as a Tenant Defence Fund, hotline, education program and campaign on the rights and obligations of tenants. Translated information is made available as well as police briefings on landlord/tenant rights.

Considered an ongoing, but not permanent, project staffed by City employees, the RHO Advisory Committee meets quarterly. The diverse needs of well-organized tenants' associations and individual landlords continue to be an operational barrier. However, there is little organization of rooming house tenants compared to apartment tenants. The RHO has successfully brought together service providers, enhanced communication and informed City staff. A goal is to have agencies post and share information on the Web site, but maintaining the currency of electronic and printed materials remains challenging with salaries, computer hardware, Web design and directories being the primary costs.

### **Case Study B: Housing Search Assistance – Action Logement/Action Housing, Ottawa**

The non-profit Action Logement was established in 1989 to assist lower-income individuals and families to retain housing and find appropriate housing. A volunteer Board of Directors oversees a staff of 10 plus student help. It has approximately 1,800 files that increase in late summer as school and winter approach. Counsellors provide direct assistance by reviewing newspaper ads or completing Housing Registry applications for social housing. But, with over 13,000 applications and a five to seven year waiting list for subsidized housing, the Registry faces rising demand.

Action Logement maintains a database by building address and has an association with the University of Ottawa Community Legal Clinic to review Rental Housing Tribunal applications. Many clients are referred by emergency shelters and two counsellors travel to nearby communities to assist clients, many of whom have language problems, low incomes, no telephone, no lease co-signers or who face discrimination because of their immigration/refugee status. Action Logement receives funding from various levels of government plus fundraising activities; however, counsellors spend considerable unpaid time providing interpretation services at tenant-landlord meetings. Mediation is provided free through the Tenant/Landlord Mediation Services (TLMS) of Ottawa-Carleton profiled in the next case study.

Staff attempt to find safe, affordable and appropriate housing, but landlords are reluctant to house low-income tenants. Client demand continues to grow, vacancy rates are low and rents have risen dramatically in the past year. Some large landlords quote a minimum income of \$35,000-\$50,000 to afford their units. Time constraints and the requirement for more counsellors fluent in both official languages hamper services. A Web site, used until last year by the public and shelters, should be reinstated if funding permits. Action Logement has found that service for households seeking housing is best provided by a non-profit agency instead of a government service. Input from the community and the involvement of volunteers is critical to success and this can be accomplished with college or university students as part of their education program. Adequate and stable staffing, equipment and facility funding are essential.

### **Case Study C: Mediation – Tenant/Landlord Mediation Services (TLMS) of Ottawa-Carleton**

Formed in 1998 through a partnership between Action Logement and the University of Ottawa Community Legal Clinic, qualified mediators provide objective mediation, conciliation and negotiation services at no charge to tenants and landlords to resolve conflicts and avoid evictions. Dealing with laws, rights and responsibilities of both parties, the TLMS and its Board of Directors is based on a community vision, neutrality, impartiality and education. Working directly with the requesting clients, 12 trained volunteer mediators seek to intervene before a situation has escalated to the Rental Housing Tribunal stage. Planned public training and awareness sessions, funded by the Trillium Foundation, will focus on large rental buildings and social housing projects. Education and publicity continue through articles in local papers and by addressing neighbourhood concerns about social housing.

Typically, seven to 12 mediation sessions occur each month, the majority being between landlord and tenant or, tenant and tenant. About 80 per cent of mediation sessions end in agreement after a two-to three-hour session. Previously, when vacancy rates were higher, dissatisfied individuals in rooming houses would move. Now they seek the assistance of mediators to resolve conflicts involving noise, behaviour, eviction or maintenance issues. Many clients have mental health problems so an interdisciplinary approach involving social workers and other supports is needed. But, mediation training programs are expensive and require significant

time commitment. TLMS relies on funding from various sources but has no base funding commitment from any one source.

Both parties must agree to a mediation and must understand their rights and responsibilities. Landlords have been reluctant to participate. Many tenants have a history of problems with landlords. Issues have often escalated before mediation is sought. Education in the mutual benefits of early intervention is necessary. The lack of qualified volunteers, the expense and time commitment of training and, the lack of funding for translation/interpretation have constrained the organization. The number of rooming house units is expected to increase in the Ottawa area, as are the requests for mediation services. The activities of the TLMS can be duplicated in other centres given ongoing funding, a pool of qualified mediators, willing participants, recognized impartiality and education to encourage early mediation.

### **Case Study D: Community Development – Portland Hotel Society, Vancouver**

Originally formed to address the needs of individuals living in the old Portland Hotel, an SRO building, the Society decided to build and operate a purpose-built facility (the new Portland Hotel) as well as manage three other projects. Funding was provided by the CMHC's Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP). Portland residents needed permanent, affordable, safe, clean housing plus a network of health and support services like nursing and addiction programs provided in situ to help them live independently. In 1991, the City sought to close the old hotel and the owner wanted to sell for redevelopment but the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) obtained a 10-year agreement to delay demolition and construct a new facility. Resident consultations found that tenants with mental health problems could not cope in independent apartments and preferred smaller units. Many were unable to prepare meals and relied on food lines, so a communal kitchen was sufficient. Couples preferred a one-bedroom apartment. The majority of SRO units were constructed with private washrooms plus some studio units with kitchenettes. Residents were moved out of the sub-standard old Portland Hotel and into the new Portland Hotel.

The Portland Hotel Society's 40 full-time and 25 on-call trained and flexible staff aim to provide a 24-hour "asylum" for socially alienated people. There is a "no

eviction" approach with the goal to find alternate housing before tenants are evicted. The Society's success is due to the cooperation of many levels of government including housing, health, social development and the attorney general. New tenants come from other SROs, institutions, shelters and off the street. Being unable to live in large quarters unsuited to their health and abilities, they deliberately choose SRO-type housing. Occupancy of the new Portland Hotel is restricted to core need (low-income) hard-to-house singles and couples with serious mental, physical and/or substance abuse problems. The Society plans to continue with existing programs and to negotiate purchase of additional projects as they become available. Renovation of existing SRO properties requires significant investment but results in lower on-going operating costs.

Staff funding, training and support is critical to the success of the Society's unique approaches. Funding to cover resident programs in the arts, acupuncture therapy, camping trips and food for communal meals is difficult to obtain. Funding for a meals program should always be included in financial requests. With adequate housing and the required supports, even the hard-to-house can find stable accommodation that is far less costly than the street-jail-hospital treadmill. The appropriate housing form with the appropriate supports can break the cycle of homelessness. By responding to resident input, the Society designed a new building that provided the required amenities and retained the old Portland Hotel for future renovation. Funding and cooperation among various partners and governments is key in such projects as is effective lobbying for funding of more SRO units.

### **Case Study E: Rehabilitation Programs – Edmonton Safe Housing Committee**

This demonstration project involved the renovation of an existing 21-unit inner city rooming house with shared washroom facilities using alternative Association for Preservation Technology (APT) housing standards in place of National Building Code and municipal standards. The non-profit APT received an ACT (Affordability and Choice Today) grant to develop lower cost Safe Housing Standards as equivalencies to standard building codes. The objectives of the 1993 demonstration project were to draft alternative health and safety standards, evaluate the project building, renovate that building, educate inspectors, then modify and evaluate the standards as well as achieve consensus with landlords. As part of the project, the Safe Housing Committee established minimum levels of health and safety for existing

## Case Study F: Legalization of Existing Units – Parkdale Pilot Project, Toronto

residential buildings of six storeys or less containing three or more units. These were adopted in 1994 and now apply to the majority of rooming houses especially those created from single-family houses. The project itself proceeded through a sequence of steps from drafting standards to consulting with stakeholders, preparing drawings and evaluating the results.

The project aimed at sub-standard rental accommodation with a focus on establishing a coordinated inspection approach involving city planning, development, finance, power, fire, health and legal departments. It was not possible for all property owners to upgrade to current standards so the Committee continued with the coordinated inspection program while working to develop alternate guidelines for the upgrading of multiple occupancy dwellings. Alternative standards were applied in the 21-unit pilot project building and cost comparisons made with similar RRAP renovation projects. For smaller "Division A" buildings (three storeys or less, fewer than 10 occupants and a resident owner) the standards developed by the Committee were too costly. Landlords were unlikely to recoup costs from rent increases to low-income tenants. However, the standards were useful for buildings housing over 10 individuals. The total cost for the demonstration project was \$50,000 or \$2,831 per unit while the cost for RRAP renovations was \$9,476 per unit. Using the alternate standards, property upgrades were one-third to one-half the cost of regular standards. And, the reaction of tenants to their new living environment was positive.

The project demonstrated practical and cost-effective upgrading could be achieved and a fair and concise set of safety, occupancy, health and upgrading standards were acceptable to inner city property owners. The Safe Housing Standards have now been implemented for all multi-unit residential units of six storeys or less in the city of Edmonton. They work best in larger buildings with active management and good maintenance. An ongoing coordinated inspection system has been limited by staffing restrictions. Poor maintenance still occurs in some buildings but is detected through tenant complaints. Some properties require frequent inspections and a fine system for owners operating unsafe buildings is under consideration with work orders attached to buildings rather than owners. Only one of the alternate standards has been changed to require pressure-treated wood or steel for exterior fire escapes.

This project addressed existing large, single-family homes that had been renovated into rooming houses and bachelorette units but had never received licenses to operate. Bachelorettes are defined as mini-apartments with a bathroom and some cooking facilities while rooming houses have shared bathrooms and cooking facilities. Although many conversions had taken place, rooming house construction had been prohibited in the Parkdale area since 1978. Licensing would ensure properties were maintained to a safe level. Many owners had not applied for licenses to avoid bringing properties up to code because of the expense and loss of units. Neighbours were concerned about property values but tenants were hesitant to complain fearing they would have no place to live. The project sought to retain housing while ensuring compliance with existing by-laws, fire and building codes.

In a door-to-door inspection of properties, some 250 buildings were identified. City staff met with residents, tenants, owners, improvement groups and social services. Mediation sessions were held. Community meetings sought stakeholder input. Units considered too small and unacceptable were found to be satisfactory living arrangements by tenants. Owners seeking to legalize a property began by submitting an application with drawings, an inspection was made and plans examined by building and fire departments. The owner was given a detailed list of improvements and a timeframe for completion. A final inspection was made by the same person who conducted the initial inspection and, if satisfactory, a rezoning was issued and the owner applied for a license to operate the building. Corporate Counsel for the City provided legal advice to the pilot project and city councillors were supportive. Throughout the process, owners dealt with one contact person.

The first hurdle was to establish alternate standards for fire, safety, zoning and building. Parking and minimum lot standards were modified in some cases depending on pre-1978 renovations or 1978-1996 renovations. Community education and participation was a prime focus. This program provided a means to encourage owners to bring their buildings up to standards. By obtaining a license to operate the building as a rooming house or bachelorettes it was easier to obtain financing or to sell. Property owners typically spent \$10,000 to



\$20,000 per building on renovations with some applying for RRAP funding to cover the costs. The program is new and fewer than 50 properties have been renovated but it will be necessary to track the licensing process, inspections and maintenance. The program is applicable to other areas of the city and to other communities; however, it does require a significant long-term municipal staffing commitment and cooperation among departments.

### **Case Study G: Supportive Housing - Supportive Housing Coalition, Toronto**

Founded in 1982, the non-profit Supportive Housing Coalition (SHC) is an agency providing permanent, safe, affordable accommodation, including 16 rooming houses, for mental health consumer-survivors at 40 locations across the city. A 1999 Coalition survey of tenants found that 31 per cent had lived in their unit two to five years and 25 per cent between five and 10 years. There is currently a 10-year waiting list so the list is closed but prospective tenants can approach some 26 affiliated agencies with varying eligibility requirements. Funding is provided by a number of sources. All tenants are encouraged to participate in their community and they must be Canadian citizens, not owe rent, not own a house and be able to live on their own with support. One-third of the 15-member SHC Board of Directors is tenants. While not providing full-time help, Supportive Housing workers assist tenants by providing counselling, referrals, organizing daily routines, helping with housekeeping, conducting neighbourhood meetings, enhancing employment opportunities and instituting problem solving strategies. There is a ratio of one housing staff person for every 90 households. Future projects will focus exclusively on independent living bachelor units, some with cooking facilities. The SHC has found that such units work best for most single people. However, many residents are not able, or do not wish, to prepare their own meals, so a community kitchen will be provided on each floor. Residents do want their own bathroom with shower and, because many medications cause heat sensitivity, air conditioning is required along with a common recreation space. Supervision, while not 24/7 will be provided with a Mental Health Outreach Team covering off-hours.

The Coalition will re-house the 5 per cent of tenants who find they are unable to live independently but they may move into a rooming house bed while awaiting appropriate housing. However, unsupervised sharing of washrooms and kitchens often causes disputes among residents and results in excessive damage to assets so the

Coalition is seeking some change-of-use designations from rooming house to staffed boarding house format. Boarding homes also are excellent transitional housing for the previously homeless.

While many SHC buildings are forms of shared housing, three factors make developing new rooming/boarding houses difficult: affordability, the need for 24-hour staffing, and its lack of suitability to clients. The close contact in rooming houses and high resident turnover elevates stress and results in behaviour problems, vandalism and higher maintenance costs. Therefore, the Coalition is seeking to transform some rooming houses into congregate living with a staff member on site or to contract these properties to outside support agencies. They have found that public education is necessary for community acceptance of such housing, and measure their success to date based on residents' length of stay, ability to keep their rent payments current and to maintain their units.

### **Conclusions**

Many initiatives can be effective in maintaining existing rooming house/SRO stock, stabilizing tenancy and improving tenants' quality of life. The debate continues over converting units into independent apartments versus maintaining old/creating new units. For clients with mental health problems there is a preference for SRO-type units over a group atmosphere unless 24-hour supervision is available. Redevelopment pressures for single family, tourist and student housing have caused a loss of permanent affordable rooming house/SRO units. Tenants report satisfaction with small units such as bachelorettes, finding them "livable" as long as safety and maintenance are adequate. Tenant preference is for SRO units with a private washroom but without kitchenette. However, more than a room is required. Communities have established supportive housing programs involving education initiatives, mediation, facilitation and conflict resolution. Alternate standards and coordinated municipal building inspections have been successful in improving the physical condition of many units. Overall, the rooming house/SRO sector plays a significant role in the "hard-to-house" market.

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### **Housing Research at CMHC**

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research.

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