



Shared Accommodation in Downtown Toronto: A New Approach to an Old Problem

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Executive Summary

Rooming houses are the only truly affordable housing provided by the private market. However, in the former city of Toronto, they are often chaotic living environments that make it difficult for tenants, many of whom are recovering from mental health and/or addiction problems. Landlords generally do not have the skills and capacity to provide social supports to their tenants and are often overwhelmed by this additional burden of "social property management".

The purpose of this report was to examine the possibilities for improving the liveability of such environments, using supports provided to the house by existing social service agencies and other community organizations.

We interviewed 25 tenants and 5 landlords. Based on the needs identified in those interviews, we then interviewed 15 representatives from various agencies and community groups in and outside the community.

We found that most agencies were at capacity and had a limited ability to re-focus resources without diverting services. That being said, most agencies already provided some individual support to tenants living in rooming houses and recognized the value in providing collaborative "whole house" support.

Based on this information, we were able outline 2 models for a particular type of "supported rooming house" that could be developed further in a second phase of this project.

Background

For low income singles living in downtown Toronto, a room in a rooming house is the only truly affordable housing provided by the private market. As such, rooming houses comprise an important but often-neglected part of the affordable housing sector. However, due to sharing, crowding and the high needs of many of the residents, the houses are sometimes in poor shape and are even chaotic environments. Sometimes conditions can become so bad some tenants return to the street or shelter.

For some, a room in a rooming house is the housing of choice. For others, rooming houses are seen and used as one of the steps from homelessness to permanent housing in a self-contained unit. As such, they can function as sort of a “waiting room” for tenants in anticipation of getting a self-contained unit in either public or market housing.

Many rooming house tenants have a history of homelessness or are living with mental health and/or addiction issues. We know that clean and stable housing is important for health and for formally homeless individuals to maintain long-term housing and break the cycle of homelessness (Tremblay 2009). If we could stabilize conditions within the rooming houses and help make them more liveable, it would provide two advantages:

- For those for whom a room is housing of choice, there would be a greater number of liveable and affordable units on the market for people seeking affordable housing and for housing workers to place their clients.
- For those for whom a room is transitional housing, stability could be introduced one step earlier in the steps from homelessness to permanent housing in a self-contained unit. Rooming house tenants would not have their recovery compromised as much by their living circumstances and would be able to start re-building their lives sooner.

Maintaining stable and liveable conditions in a rooming house is difficult for even the most conscientious landlord. Rooming houses seem to have a disproportionately higher burden of “social property management”, that is, the necessity to attend to the psycho-social needs of the tenants (in addition to the landlord’s conventional property management responsibilities).

Typically, the landlord is a “hands on” owner/operator. Meeting the varied needs of their tenants often requires that the landlord be a part-time housing support worker, a task for which they may not have the skills or time. Also problematic is an inherent imbalance of power in this type of helping relationship which leads to the potential for exploitation of vulnerable tenants and/or a tendency to paternalism.

Contrary to received opinion, financial returns from running a rooming house are very small (Oriole Research 2008; SHS 2004). This makes it hard to hire staff, particularly skilled staff, to help in its operations. Most rooming houses could benefit from the additional aid of housing support workers. Landlords themselves could also use support.

The Rupert Pilot Project (Ward and Associates 1993) demonstrated that providing dedicated social supports to rooming houses could improve social conditions inside the house and enhance the sense of community among the residents, many of whom had been socially isolated and/or homeless.

The CRC Self-Help model (www.crcselfhelp.ca), which uses dedicated workers in a facilitative role to support their rooming houses, has been successful at keeping formerly homeless individuals stably housed over long periods of time.

The experiences of the Rupert project and CRC Self-Help indicate the success of using targeted and rooming house-specific social supports to help compensate for the inherent limitations of living in small, shared spaces and to take advantage of the potential of shared living to build a supportive community atmosphere.

The researchers, based on previous experience helping to stabilize rooming houses, already had a sense that it often takes three factors to “turn around” a house:

1. Support from local agencies
2. A landlord who works cooperatively with local agencies and sees him/herself as a provider of affordable housing embedded within the social service milieu in a given neighbourhood
3. An engaged tenant

This describes a potentially new type of supported rooming house - a hybrid between a traditional independent rooming house and other forms of supportive housing - that can create a much more liveable environment for its residents.

Why this research study?

The two stated examples (Rupert & CRC Self Help), rooming house initiatives using paid dedicated support workers, have shown good results. We wanted to know if it was possible to develop a more generalized model that makes use of existing services in a given community.

We wanted to know if enough services already existed within a given neighbourhood that could be used to support this type of rooming house and if landlords would find this service of value.

We also wanted to see if there would be interest from community groups (with possible volunteer participation) to explore the potential for a tenant superintendant role to be supported by a peer support program.

Parkdale, in the west end of inner Toronto, with its many rooming houses and support services, was chosen for the focus of the survey.

Our Questions

Through limited qualitative research, we hoped to address at least some of the following questions:

- Could supports be provided from agencies and other local resources to meet the needs of rooming house tenants living in Parkdale?
- Are there enough resources in the agencies and community groups in this area to support a project of this type?
- Could existing services be re-deployed or re-focused to link to a rooming house? Would agencies have enough existing capacity to deliver this service or would they need additional resources?
- What were the needs of tenants living in this area? What did tenants think were the main challenges? What did they think would be helpful?
- What do landlords think the challenges are? What did they think would be helpful? Would they welcome workers in their property and be willing to work co-operatively with them?
- Would other community groups be able to help?
- What about peer participation?

“Large - scale projects such as the Rupert may be possible, but in an era of restraint it is unlikely that the same level of funding could be secured. Smaller initiatives over a longer - term, which cost less from year to year to operate but which accomplishes its work incrementally, may be possible depending on the right circumstances “

Shapcott, Michael, The Rupert Pilot Project: A Self-Help and Community Rehabilitation Project in Canada; Habitat International Coalition 1996

Ethical Review

This community-based research (CBR) study was approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the Community Based Research Centre (CBRC) in British Columbia. The CBRC REB is registered with the National Council on Ethics in Human Research (NCEHR) and follows the Tri-council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (1998). The qualitative nature of CBR speaks to its fluid design and implementation. According to the CBRC, “The primary role of the REB is to provide ethical guidance and consultation to community-based researchers and research participants. “

Because CBR often deals with vulnerable populations, this kind of research presents special concerns. To wit, the relationship between the interviewee and interviewer is negotiated. The interviewee always has a voice in the research – not just in the answers but also in the make-up of the session.

Our discussions with the REB chair revolved around “reasonably foreseeable harms and risk of harms”. That is to say, rather than be constrained by care for any and all risk, however remote, we were asked to consider ethical constraints attuned to risks that were within the real realm of possibility. This, again, speaks to the subject-centred perspective of ethics review in accordance with the TCPS.

The process helped us be more reflective and practical in the interview process. An example of this was our assumption that we needed signed consent from the interviewee before we began. We assumed this because that is normal in research studies – and is normal because of liability issues (and perhaps rightfully so) amongst other reasons. However, in discussions, we realized that it wasn’t necessary, at least partly because it would not be demanded by the subject of the interview. There was no reasonable harm or risk of harm in not having signed consent. Indeed, a signed contract goes against the agreement-oriented nature of this research and can be a barrier in the relational character of this research.

The main principles of the CBRC (in accordance with the TCPS) are:

- Respect for human dignity
- Respect for free and informed consent
- Respect for vulnerable persons
- Respect for privacy and confidentiality
- Respect for justice and inclusiveness
- Balancing harms and benefits
- Minimising harm
- Maximising benefit

The Research

The following section contains the actual results of interviews with tenants, landlords, agency workers and others. In this section we draw out the salient points of the survey, in our opinion. Due to the limitations of this research, in-depth analysis is limited. Nevertheless, we are confident in the research and the conclusions that led to the proposed model. We welcome any inquiries to the details of the research. (The subsequent section draws out a model, based on this research, which attempts to address issues apparent in some rooming houses, with the goal of encouraging good and better rooming houses.)

Tenants

We interviewed 25 rooming houses tenants, about one-third of whom were female and two-thirds male. The majority of the tenants were between 40 and 60 years of age. Most were contacted through drop-ins, the local community health centre and by networking via interviewees. While this probably represents a sample weighted toward users of those services, this also most likely represents a majority of the rooming house tenant population in this neighbourhood. Most tenants have lived in their current home three years or less.

Prior to their present living situation, most tenants surveyed had lived in a rooming house (or had lived in a rooming house prior to a short period of homelessness) before moving into their current house.

Percentage	Previous Housing
28%	Rooming house in west end
12 %	Rooming house in another neighbourhood
24 %	Homeless
8 %	Jail
8 %	Supportive Housing

Percentage	Previous Housing
8 %	Family
4 %	Apartment
4 %	Shared apartment
4 %	Public housing

We asked tenants about some of the things that bothered them enough to leave their previous housing, even in some cases to return to shelters or the street. Of this group the single most cited reason for leaving (38%) fell into the category of conflict or tension with other tenants (theft, drug use, drug traffic, noise, cleanliness, etc.). The next most common reason (25%) was poor building maintenance (including pest infestation). Eviction accounted for 19% (causes for eviction: excessive noise, bringing traffic into building, arrears).

“Too many people coming in, too much traffic and drinking, which tempted me to drink. I’m taking meds and can’t drink”
Tenant

“Tension in the house is a big thing... people who are cracked out, you never know what they will do”
Tenant

When we asked tenants what they liked and disliked about rooming houses where they had lived in the past, we found the responses could be grouped together under three broad categories:

Social

Relationships with other tenants (often spoken of in terms of conflict around theft, noise, cleanliness, drugs and drug traffic) and with the landlord.

Maintenance

Promptness and quality of repairs, overall building condition, cleanliness, pests.

Building Attributes

Location, size of room, number of people sharing, ability to cook in room.

Percentage	Category
43%	Social
38 %	Building Attributes
19%	Maintenance

“The size of the room is important and how many people share kitchen and washroom, how clean they keep the building. Good location is important, to be near grocery store and libraries.”
Tenant

We asked tenants what they liked and disliked about their present housing.

Percentage	Category
28%	Social
32%	Maintenance
29%	Building Attributes
11%	Other

The preponderance of comments about maintenance may be because several of the interviewees lived in one particular house which was in very bad shape (tenants mentioned low water pressure, low heat, pests and broken security door locks). Nevertheless, a number of tenants liked the level of maintenance in their building, mentioning cleanliness, no bugs and prompt repairs.

Under building attributes, about one half mentioned location - for example, liking that they were near a grocery store, services (drop in, health centre, hospital) and the lake.

Relations with landlord were generally favourable.

Percentage	Relationship with Landlord
52%	Okay to pretty good
16%	Minimal contact “businesslike”
32%	Bad to very bad

Comments by tenants on their relationship with landlords included:

“He doesn’t speak much English but he is friendly. We get along well.”

“He was going to evict me but I stopped drinking so much and they let me stay. Now I only drink once a week”

“He treated you like a human being and respected you as a person as well as a tenant...He was down to earth... If you were an okay tenant he would let you know he liked having you.”

“He stuck to the rules, didn’t let anyone get away with anything but was fair.”

“He might not directly say it, but would give the impression, the vibe, that he liked you and that your tenancy was secure. At the same time if you did something wrong he’d let you know.”

“I don’t bug the landlord (about repairs) because I am afraid of losing my housing.”

“He doesn’t do repairs but still I have to pay rent.”

“The landlord would try to swap rent for sex.”

Percentage	Relations With Other Tenants
24%	Pretty good to very good
16%	Okay
16%	Very good with some, avoid others
32%	Minimal contact “keep to myself”
12%	Not very good

The most common response, minimal contact, may indicate a high percentage of social isolation among these tenants or may just represent a reasonable reaction to chaotic conditions, or lack of security in the house.

Some of the comments tenants made about why they keep to themselves:

“They’re okay but I prefer to keep to myself.”

“When I am using, I get paranoid.”

“They want to know your business.”

“I don’t hang around with people who use or sell crack. Crack fucked up the whole house.”

“Other tenants try to steal from me, especially when I have a seizure.”

Others got along well with their fellow tenants:

“There are two tenants in the house I like, we hang around together on the porch and have long talks”

When asked what services they use, few tenants had workers who came to the house. Seven tenants did have workers (nurses, housing workers or social workers) that came to visit them at their home. Many used services at the local community health centre. Ten of the tenants saw a family doctor located in their neighbourhood while seven had a doctor in another neighbourhood.

Tenant suggestions for service improvement

The last section of the questionnaire dealt with tenants' opinions and suggestions for service improvement. When asked about services they would like to see, most tenants suggested various things that we have broken down into four main categories: support, maintenance, advocacy, health.

Support

Almost half of the interviewees requested assistance from support workers.

"If they did let workers in, it would be helpful to have... a monthly check-in with each tenant. Ask them, 'Are you okay? Are you comfortable in your home? Is everything okay?' But don't come more than once a month. If you do too much, people feel like they're controlled...then it's not really your home. Once a month is perfect."

Maintenance

A number spoke of the need for additional maintenance services, improvement to the current practice and pest control.

Advocacy

One fifth asked for mediation and advocacy services that included mediation with landlord and explaining tenant rights.

"People in rooming houses feel they have no power, to have an advocate would be really good."

Health

Some tenants said they would like a nurse or doctor to come to their home because it was hard for them to get out.

Any other comments?

"We need to clean up the place and have better support."

"As long as I'm not being bothered by other tenants I'm okay."

Landlords

We interviewed four landlords and one property manager.

One characteristic they all have in common is being "hands on" owner/operators. They are very much involved in their properties in terms of repairs and the relationships with their tenants.

There was a convergence of opinion regarding common problems. Many of the same things that bothered tenants were also of concern to landlords.

Pests

The landlords' primary concern regarding pest control was with tenant behaviour that increased the risk of infestation, i.e., bringing in "street junk" from off the street, not keeping their room and common areas clean and, in the worst case, hoarding behaviours. Landlords asked for help especially with the latter, which they found extremely difficult to deal with.

Drug and sex work traffic

Both are very difficult to control and can be even dangerous, especially to vulnerable tenants.

Landlords' interest in tenants

All the landlords took an interest in their tenants. This was expressed on many levels, from a simple acknowledgement that they enjoyed working with tenants to a more active involvement. One landlord spoke of trying to encourage a feeling of community within the building. Some mentioned that they very much liked seeing people recover and move on. All spoke explicitly about their interest in their tenants. They said they enjoyed the work and found it fulfilling.

"They are interesting people. It's fulfilling work. You sometimes see improvement over the years. Many of the tenants become your friends."

One landlord said that over the years he had learned that to be successful you had to understand your tenants and respect them and in some ways relate to them almost as a peer rather than a conventional landlord.

"You must respect the tenant. Act as one of them, not a landlord. It took me years to learn this."

When asked about problems with tenants he replied that:

"They are all good because I am good [to them]. I don't bother anybody unless it is warranted. You must know your people and take them as they come....Sometimes you get bad people but you be good to them and they learn."

He also talked about checking in on people with mental health problems when they were unwell and asked other tenants to look out for them as well.

The Burden of "Social Property Management"

It would be interesting to study this attitude of the personal involvement of rooming house landlords with that of landlords of other types of rental housing. Hearing these stories tends to support our assumption that the need for "social property management" is disproportionately higher in rooming houses than conventional rentals.

One agency interviewee was aware of this tendency but noted that, although there is a value in it, it is a double-edged sword. When landlords don't have the skills and accountability of a trained worker, they can make things worse. As importantly, the inherent conflict of interest in providing supports as well as housing can lead to a paternalistic relationship between the

landlord and tenants which can be easily exploited by an unscrupulous landlord. Even if a paternalistic relationship is benign, it is problematic for a tenant's autonomy, and is known to impede recovery from mental health and other social problems.

Some of the comments tenants made speak to this problem:

"He runs peoples lives. He has no regard for them. He hurts them."

"He talks about me to other tenants."

Need for Support Workers: Support for the tenants; Support for the house

Landlords sometimes feel that they don't have the capacity to deal with many of the issues that arise in their properties. A number would like workers to help with the following:

- Tenants' mental health or addictions crises
- Disputes between tenants
- Cleanliness issues (this could include personal cleanliness, but mainly housekeeping (especially common areas); hoarding is a particularly difficult issue for landlords to deal with

Another landlord said that housing workers are good but they only work with their own clients and generally only provide follow-up support for a short period of time. He would like someone assigned to the whole house that he could call in the event of a crisis who would work with any tenant in the house.

Other landlords also commented that it would be helpful to have support workers specialized in working with rooming houses assigned to one or more houses.

"[If I had] regular, constructive feedback from agencies about problems, I would address them promptly."

Support for Landlords

Although not stated by any landlords, two workers pointed out that there is a need for community development with landlords. Landlords could use help with the following: education and advice on rooming house regulations, licensing system and hearings, financial support programs, mediation with neighbours over community complaints and supporting their tenants.

Agencies/Community Groups

We interviewed fifteen representatives from agencies and community groups from across the city because of their familiarity with rooming houses. Although the questions were targeted at service providers we also made an effort to seek out the opinions of other independent community organizations. The latter included groups like tenant associations, housing groups, faith groups and neighbourhood associations.

Agency workers' opinions about the challenges in rooming houses closely converged with those identified by tenants and landlords (maintenance, conflict with other tenants, etc.). They also pointed out issues that landlords and tenants hadn't identified (social isolation, poverty, poor physical health, seniors' mobility and health, etc.).

Agencies listed services they thought were helpful, most of which they already provide, including: eviction prevention, mediation, legal assistance, addiction counselling, referrals to various services, advocacy, etc.

A service not currently provided that some interviewees thought would be helpful was support for a peer advocacy program.

"I'm glad to hear that tenants identified those priorities because that's what we thought too."
Agency worker

Meeting the needs

The interviewees were asked two questions which were derived from an analysis of tenant and landlord responses.

1. Tenants have identified the following needs:

Advocacy, mediation with landlord, eviction prevention (advice on Residential Tenancies Act, etc.), mediation with other tenants, general support (check-ins, etc.).

Do you see any way your agency could meet those needs?

2. Landlords have identified the following needs:

Support worker assigned to the house who the landlord can call in case of crises that the landlord does not have the capacity to deal with. Typical issues would be: mental health/addictions, disputes between tenants, cleanliness (especially hoarding issues).

Do you see any way your agency could meet those needs?

How many clients or houses do you think one worker could handle?

While many of the tenant services were already provided by various agencies, it was unlikely that any one particular agency could provide all of these services.

Services are generally delivered through supports provided to the agencies' individual clients. Services are delivered in-house and also follow clients into their housing. Some resources are accessed by tenants on their own initiative.

Most of the services to their rooming house clients were delivered on an individual basis. None of the agency services were targeted to a specific house.

All agencies felt that at present they were at capacity and not in a position to provide general “whole house” support as this would require more staffing and, for most, a major restructuring of how they work.

Some agencies felt they may have the flexibility to re-focus some of their services to provide support to the entire house, but could only provide limited resources, up to perhaps a few hours a week of staff time.

One agency said that although they couldn't have specific workers assigned to specific houses, they could have the supports they provide follow their clients into those houses. One way to do that would be to have a rooming house participate in a program, whereby if they accept housing referrals from the agency's workers, supports would follow.

Working with landlords

Few of the agencies worked along with landlords or thought of their role as landlord support. They usually encountered them when mediating with clients. Several thought this was a much-neglected aspect of their work and worth pursuing.

“I am happy that people are asking these questions... I hope it begins a dialogue between landlord and agencies, where we are not looking at each other as ad-versaries but as a possible resource for each other.”

Some had reservations (“Why should I help the landlord make money?” “I don't want to be a bouncer for the landlord”) while some thought the landlord should pay for the service. Others commented that it took time to build a relationship with a landlord and when advocating for tenants, tensions arise that can strain the relationship with the landlord.

Crisis support

Landlords' request for help with tenant crises could be managed by regularly scheduled 9-5 workers or even part-time staff, perhaps with occasional additional help from relief staff.

Generally in supported rooming houses, the day-to-day support is more in the nature of building management, punctuated by occasional crises that require more resources for a small period of time until the crisis has settled.

“People who are housed have usually dealt with the chaotic problems that require intense support.”

Perhaps housing support workers could provide introduction and links to relevant emergency services and educate the landlord on best practices to follow in event of an emergency.

Inter-agency collaboration

In the west end, there is already a history of inter-agency collaboration in various ways. This can be through referrals, collaboration on projects, providing services in each other's facilities, outreach workers from different agencies going out together, etc.

Some agencies, for example, are already participating in a city-wide rooming house networking group.

Seniors

Some interviewees commented that seniors seem to be a growing part of the west end rooming house population. Needs particular to this group include: regular check-ins on their health and to reduce social isolation, errands for those with mobility problems, trips to grocery store/food bank/pharmacy, etc.

One provider commented that people with a history of homelessness tend to age more quickly and often don't live long enough to qualify for entrance into seniors programs. Many rooming house tenants, with a history of homelessness, who are in their 50's or even mid 40's, have needs similar to seniors. There may a need to redefine a "senior" for those who have a history of homelessness.

This is necessary for two reasons:

1. To properly conceive of appropriate services
2. To consider being more flexible with age requirements for entry into seniors programs by taking into account people's health as well as chronological age

"...for seniors programs... a lot of our people don't live long enough to qualify." Agency worker

"It seems to me like [there are] more older people in rooming houses in Parkdale these days. Bachelor apartments used to be affordable for seniors, now a lot of them move to rooming houses when they go on old age pension."

"If people want to live in a rooming house, they should be able to live there as long as it is safe... The onus should be on society to provide services to allow people to stay in their housing of choice as long as it is safe."

Social Isolation

Several respondents commented on the problem of social isolation. Workers have observed that often social isolation can develop when people move off the street and into housing. On the street they are visible and connected to services out of necessity. However, once housed, some isolate themselves in their room and lose connections to their old social networks and the services they used to use.

One advantage of shared living is the contact with other tenants that helps to cut against this tendency. However, the response from tenants to how they get along with other tenants was that many of them keep to themselves. The experience of workers interviewed indicates that social isolation is also a problem in rooming houses.

Peer Participation

Peer Advocacy Network

Going into this study we thought there may be a role for peer workers. We conceived of this mainly in terms of social enterprise, specifically a cleaning and maintenance service. However, in the course of an interview, a peer involved in a local housing group pointed out that there already exists an informal peer support network among tenants for advocacy, assistance and mediation around tenant issues and that perhaps some support could improve the efficacy of this network.

We found this an intriguing prospect that bears further examination that would require some community development, perhaps in a second phase of the project. Two workers expressed interest in supporting such an endeavour.

Suggested interventions could include logistical support, education (“train the trainer”), legal resources (literature, access to legal advice), emotional support, remuneration/honorariums, etc.

The Ambassador Project and Heat Response program (operated out of the Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC)) provide good examples and best practices for a project of this type.

Peer maintenance program

In our experience we have found that often a tenant who has an interest in the house and takes on an informal superintendent role, doing cleaning and some maintenance, is important to improving liveability in the house. In fact in our experience, sometimes an engaged tenant can drive that process by alerting the landlord to problems in the house and persuading them to do something about it.

We thought there would be some promise in expanding that role by linking it to local agencies to provide peer support for such a position.

We interviewed a member/employment co-ordinator at a local agency and found out that it was not as straightforward as we first supposed. There are many complexities to peer employment conducted outside of the agency which present a number of problems.

Administrative Complexity

Often the rooming house superintendent role is an informal arrangement.

Formalizing the relationship increases costs, particularly in terms of administration. This raises the question of whether the landlord, as is normal in any employer/employee relationship, or an outside agency incur that cost?

If the latter, the agency is the employer and is responsible for administration, working conditions and job safety, and is accountable to the landlord for the employee’s performance. In the

experience of the worker we interviewed, co-ordinating the administration of a position such as this can be fairly complex job.

In this arrangement the landlord should pay the agency for the service but how much? Given the financial constraints inherent in the rooming house business the landlord's contribution is limited, but the agency also has reservations about subsidizing a private business.

Other potential problems have to be considered as well, including the difficulty for the tenant to keep the balance of simply being a tenant and then being a mediator between other tenants and the landlord. The tenant is reliant on the landlord for housing. Pushing the landlord to make improvements can endanger tenancy or raise the level of tension in the relationship. It can also increase tension with other tenants, particularly in regard to security concerns. To implement such a program would require some community development work.

The potential for a program of this type could be explored in a second phase of this project.

Volunteers

An interview with a representative from a faith group confirmed that there is a good possibility that volunteers would be interested in assisting rooming house tenants. This would involve some development work, giving presentations on rooming houses to faith groups to assess the degree of interest and available skills. If it is found that there is potential, then time would have to be spent developing a program that matches needs and skills and thinking through the role of volunteers in terms of safety and boundary issues.

Types of houses

One idea floated by some tenants and workers was a rating system for rooming houses. However upon reflection we found that it may be more useful to think in terms of "types" of houses. This came from listening to tenant needs and perceiving that they sometimes had conflicting preferences. One landlord who had houses in different areas of the city pointed out that the tenant populations in all neighbourhoods are not the same. They do not necessarily have the same needs. He found that in Parkdale, for example, his tenants had greater needs in terms of mental health and addictions.

In addition, different tenant groups within the same neighbourhood can have different needs. Two workers pointed out that in the last few years they have started to see an increase in the working poor, usually recent immigrants, in west end rooming houses. The tenants of a rooming house catering to this population would not necessarily have the same needs as the traditional west end tenant population.

"The average newcomer living in a rooming house has different needs. They are generally healthy but need to know about other services relevant to them"
Agency worker

One worker had tried a rating system for rooming houses several years ago and found that it wasn't helpful because it was hard to judge as different tenants had different preferences. For example, whereas a majority preferred a clean and quiet house, some wanted a place where they could socialize and have their friends and partners stay overnight. Some don't feel comfortable in a house that is higher quality because they feel they don't fit in or that if they cause a bit of damage they will be evicted.

In self-contained units, noise is contained somewhat and people have control over guests and standards of cleanliness in their own unit. One key to maintaining stability in shared accommodation is adhering to sensible, fair, mutually-agreed-upon house rules. This involves a compromise between personal autonomy and stability. Some are fine with this, even thrive on it. For others it is an uneasy compromise that brings its own tension.

It is best if people have a range of choices that suit them, especially for those with a history of homelessness who are adjusting to being housed again. It is useful for housing workers to be aware of the different types of houses to be able to match clients to the type of house they prefer.

Some of the tenants' comments speak to this:

"They should have a rating system for rooming houses like they have for restaurants."

"It's good to know what the house is like before you move in. Nothing against people who drink but constant partying can disturb the whole house."

"I like a place where I can make noise and have my boyfriend over."

Summary

Most workers that we talked to were enthusiastic about the project and thought that it was necessary. They felt it important to consider the overall atmosphere of the house as well as the needs of their individual clients.

“This would fill a huge void that would be mutually beneficial: from the landlord’s point of view there would be less turnover and tenants would be more likely to stay on.”

“A program like this should be implemented to stop people from falling through the cracks.”

“Our role was to improve conditions in rooming houses and make them safer. Now that we have achieved that for tenants, it’s time for the next humane steps - supports for tenants.” Housing activist involved in Parkdale Pilot Project

What now? A Practical Model

We know that tenants are concerned about (among other things) the social conditions of the house they live in. They said they would like help with mediation and conflict resolution with their landlords and fellow tenants and also personal and group support.

Landlords recognize the importance of support and were willing to work with agencies and had asked for a support worker for their tenants.

Agencies told us they could and do provide most of those services but in a one-to-one service relationship delivered to rooming house tenants dispersed throughout the community. They agreed with the concerns defined by tenants and landlords and saw the need for rooming house support. Unfortunately, they were not set up to deliver “whole house” support to any specific house. To do so would require major restructuring and additional resources.

However, some agencies said that it may be possible to make an arrangement whereby they house their clients in a specific rooming house (or houses) and have services follow the clients to the house. Basically, all parties would come to an agreement whereby workers agree to house a number of supported tenants in one house and work with the landlord. The house would use the existing services of one-to-one support workers and concentrate them in one house with the different agencies working in a collaborative network.

What would this look like? How is it different from what already exists?

What are the advantages?

At present, agencies provide individualized support to rooming house tenants dispersed throughout the community in different houses. They don't consider “whole house support”. Their tenants are often negatively impacted by the atmosphere in the house which produces crises that workers respond to in an individualized way. They don't consider trying to change the conditions in the houses that provoke these crises or, if they do, they have few mechanisms and strategies for doing so.

Characteristics of This Model

1. Focuses a number of tenants in one particular house:
 - a. Most tenants would have supports of some type. This means workers are present on a regular basis and available to intervene in the event of a crisis.
2. Agencies work collaboratively:

The benefits of this are:

 - a. In the event of a conflict between tenants, their workers can contact each other and all work together to mediate the conflict.

- b. Different agencies provide different services which ideally would complement each other and provide a comprehensive package of services; workers could more easily access these services for their clients.
- c. “Whole house support” – ideally, there would be enough funding available to have a worker, even part-time, that concerns themselves with the whole house. This “whole house” support worker would: hold group meetings, identify and trouble-shoot interpersonal conflict, link workers together, link workers to land-lord, mediate with the neighbours, if necessary.

Even if there isn't any room in the budget for a worker like this, it is promising that the workers are thinking along these lines.

A Particular Type of House

This would be a particular type of house that may not be the first choice of all tenants. Tenants that would prefer this type of house would be those who would appreciate the assistance of support workers and would like to live in a semi-structured environment that emphasizes quiet, stability and community. All rooming houses would not necessarily run this way but nonetheless all landlords could probably learn something from it and could incorporate some of the lessons learned into their own practice.

Other Advantages

Scaleable

One advantage of this model is that it is scaleable depending upon budget. It could be started as a small demonstration project with a minimum budget by bringing interested agencies and a landlord together to work out an arrangement with one house using existing services. If more money were available, they could add a dedicated “whole house” support worker either part-time or full-time or expand to include more houses.

Adaptable

This process can be used to adapt specific services found in any given neighbourhood to the specific needs in that neighbourhood. For example, rooming house tenants in Toronto's inner suburbs may have lighter social and health support needs and more need of services for recent immigrants and low wage workers.

Feasibility

This is a general outline of a possible project that seems practical and do-able with existing resources. The specific details of the service would have to be worked out by all parties involved in a series of meetings in the lead-up to the project. It would take into account the individual needs of the tenants in the house and the exact services available to the network.

A demonstration project would be a good way of testing the concept and working out the details in practice. It would be relatively inexpensive to start a small, time-limited demonstration project.

Next Steps

1. As mentioned above, there is a Rooming House Networking Group that has been operating in parallel fashion to this study looking to link rooming house landlords with local agencies and the services that they offer. Their goal is to link landlords and agencies in the same geographical area and attempt to formalize relationships that contribute to stable tenancies.

There is some serendipity in terms of timing and the involvement of particular people. As a result, an event is planned for the spring of 2010 that will combine the public launch of this report and the beginning of work towards linking in a pro-active way services and landlords. The Rooming House Working Group (a city-sponsored group of agencies, landlords, tenants and city staff that has been in existence for over 40 years) has approved its sponsorship of this joint event - the launch and networking. (This approval, amongst other things, will provide the event with some city staff support in terms of marketing as well as the ability to mail advertising for the event to all licensed landlords.) The hope of the researchers and the networking group is that the study will provide greater legitimacy to the nascent networking proposal and attract a greater number of housing workers and landlords.

2. There is some interest in the Parkdale area of a landlord and some agency staff to begin a pilot project based on the model above. The hope is to begin this pilot in the near future.

Appendix 1

Tenant Questions

1. How long have you been living at this present address?
2. Where did you live before?
3. Can you tell me why you left that housing?
4. Have some rooming houses you've lived in been better or worse than where you are now? What did you like about them? What did you dislike?
5. What do you like about your present house? Are there things that you don't like?
6. What's your relationship like with the landlord?
7. How do you get along with the other tenants?
8. How do you get along with the neighbours?
9. When you have a conflict with someone how do you deal with it?
10. Can you describe your health?
11. Do you drink or take street drugs?
12. Do you see doctors, workers or other supports? What part of the city are they located? Do any of them visit you at home?
13. Are there services you would like to see provided in your present housing? Examples: recreational services, support workers, access to health services, etc.
14. Any improvements you could suggest?
15. Do you have any other comments?

Landlord Questions

1. For how long have you been a housing provider?
2. How many tenants live in your rooming house?
3. What's the hardest thing about running a rooming house?
4. What other problems do you have?
5. What are common problems that arise when dealing with tenants?

6. Is there anything that would help you with those problems?
7. What do you like about your tenants? What do you dislike?
8. In an ideal world what would your tenants be like? What would they do or not do?
9. Can you think of any way to improve the situation so that it approaches that ideal?
10. Can you think of anything that would help you achieve this?
11. Have you worked with housing workers? What do you know about what they do?
12. How about other social workers?
13. What would you like to do differently? What would help you do that?
14. Could you tell us what resources would be helpful to you, e.g., recreational needs, support workers, health needs, etc.?
15. Do you feel you have enough resources from the community to help you?
16. Any other comments?

Agency Questions

1. Are you aware of the rooming houses in your area?
2. Have you worked with rooming house tenants or landlords?
3. If so, what has been your experience in terms of needs identified and services required or community complaints?
4. Have you been able to provide any of those services?
5. Tenants have identified the following needs:

Advocacy and mediation with the landlord, typically disputes over maintenance issues, pest control and arrears.

Eviction prevention: advice on the Residential Tenancies Act, accompaniment to Landlord and Tenant Board.

Mediation with other tenants re: conflicts over cleanliness, noise, food, traffic.

Support: regular monthly one-to-one check-ins and group house meetings.

Do you see any way your agency could meet those needs?

6. Landlords have identified the following needs:

Support worker assigned to the house who the landlord can call in the case of a crisis that the landlord does not have the expertise to deal with. Typical issues: mental health, addictions, disputes between tenants, cleanliness (this could be personal cleanliness but mainly house cleaning, especially hoarding issues).

Do you see any way your agency could meet those needs?

How many clients or houses do you think one worker could handle?

7. Would providing any of the above services/supports be possible with your current resources?
8. Do you think you would be willing or able to re-focus existing services to meet these needs?
9. What additional resources might you require to meet these needs? (This might be expressed as additional hours for existing staff, maybe new staff with particular skills or perhaps a new position.)
10. Do you have any other comments/suggestions?

Appendix 2

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Appendix 3

Study Title: Shared Accommodation in Downtown West Toronto: A New Approach to an Old Problem.

Researchers: Jacques Tremblay, Paul Denison

Sponsor: Wellesley Institute

Thank you for taking the time to participate in our study.

My name is _____ I am a researcher/community worker with the Toronto Christian Resource Centre which has been supporting rooming house tenants and landlords since the 1960's.

We are doing this study to find out what type of services could be provided by local social service agencies and community organizations that would be helpful for rooming house tenants and landlords.

We are asking for 30-60 minutes of your time. We would like hear your opinion on:
What you think would be helpful to you or other tenants in your building or other buildings you have lived in.

What problems you see or know about in rooming houses

Your likes and dislikes about the house you currently live in or houses where you have lived in the past.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and participants can refuse to answer any question or may withdraw from the interview at any time with absolutely no consequences. Your answers will only be seen by the researchers. Your name will appear nowhere on the transcripts. We will not record your name or address anywhere.

This project has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the Community Based Research Centre Research Ethics Board based in Vancouver. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study please contact Russel Ogden at (604) 540-4342 or rdogden@telus.net.

You will receive a \$20 honorarium for your time at the end of the interview, even if you don't answer all the questions. You will be asked to sign for the honorarium. The signed sheets will be kept separate from the interview sheets.

Do you have any questions before we begin?



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