

***“Can you send someone who speaks  
my language?”***

## **Language barriers among older adults living in Toronto’s social housing**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Older adults living in social housing are among the most vulnerable and marginalized in the community. They face a variety of physical, mental, and social health challenges that negatively impact their ability to maintain successful tenancies. For those who do not speak English proficiently, language barriers add another layer of complexity to accessing housing supports.

This paper explores the experiences and needs of older adults with limited English proficiency living in social housing in Toronto, Canada. This analysis draws on in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups with 58 older social housing tenants and 58 local health and community service providers who support them.

Tenants with limited English proficiency described several challenges accessing information about their building, unit, and tenancy, as written notices were often in English. Conversations with housing staff were also an everyday challenge for tenants who could not speak English fluently. As a result, tenants relied heavily on informal support networks, such as their children or neighbours, to navigate English communication. While some tenants were able to access community services in their language of choice, many service providers noted that a lack of translation and interpretation services within the sector created barriers accessing home and community care services in diverse languages.

Five groups of actions are recommended to enhance housing supports for older social housing tenants with limited English proficiency to ensure that they can age in their homes for as long as possible with dignity and in comfort.

1. Record language profiles of all older tenants and track preferred language of communication, as well as English proficiency levels.
2. Improve language-access. This may include increasing the accessibility and linguistic diversity of housing-related information and ensuring that community initiatives and events include interpretation and/or translation services.
3. Ensure that staff are trained on how to access and make use of available translation and interpretation services.
4. Proactively share information with tenants in languages they understand. This includes information related to housing (e.g., leasing documents, tenant handbook, annual rent reviews, building notices), as well as information on community agencies that offer support services in diverse languages.
5. Facilitate more engagement of tenants with limited English proficiency in service monitoring and evaluation to foster tenant empowerment and ensure that they have opportunities to participate in and shape their community.

## INTRODUCTION

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In Canada, 31% of older adults are immigrants<sup>1</sup>. Most older immigrants to Canada come from countries where neither English nor French are the primary languages spoken<sup>2</sup>, and up to 50% lack proficiency in either official language<sup>1</sup>. The ability to speak the local language is an important determinant of health<sup>3</sup>. For older people with limited English proficiency, health and social needs are heightened<sup>4,5</sup> yet language has been frequently identified as a barrier for seeking, accessing, and using health and community support services<sup>2,6-8</sup>.

Housing has been identified as a key challenge for older immigrants<sup>9</sup>, particularly for those with limited English proficiency who often have very low incomes<sup>1</sup>. As a result, many live in social housing<sup>10</sup> where rents are geared to income. There is little research, however, exploring the experiences of older adults with limited English proficiency living in social housing. For these tenants, language barriers, such as a lack of translated written documents (e.g., lease or annual rent reviews), and limited interpretation services for face-to-face interactions with housing staff may make housing security more vulnerable<sup>11</sup>.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the housing experiences of low-income older tenants with limited English proficiency. This analysis draws on qualitative data that was collected as part of a larger study examining the experiences of older adults living in social housing, including the challenges they face and the types of resources and supports they need to have successful tenancies<sup>12</sup>. Language barriers were identified as a salient factor. This article explores these barriers in-depth and identifies opportunities to strengthen housing and support services for tenants with limited English proficiency. Improving tenant communication will ensure that all older tenants, regardless of their spoken language, have barrier-free access to housing, health, and community supports to promote successful tenancies and age in place.

### Current policy context: Enhancing services for older adults in Toronto Community Housing

This study was conducted with older adult tenants and service providers living and working in Toronto Community Housing (TCH). TCH is the largest social housing provider in Canada. At the time of this study approximately one quarter of the tenants living in TCH were older adults and half lived in one of 83 “seniors-designated” apartment buildings.

Older adults in TCH come from diverse linguistic and ethnocultural backgrounds, with nearly half speaking languages other than English<sup>13</sup>. Many also experience poor health, reduced mobility, social isolation, and cognitive impairment<sup>14,15</sup>. These challenges intersect with and exacerbate other vulnerabilities such as racialized and gender-based poverty, structural and systematic racism, and unequal access to supports<sup>16</sup>. As a result, many older tenants struggle to maintain their tenancy<sup>17</sup>. For those who do not speak English proficiently, language barriers add another layer of complexity to accessing housing supports<sup>18</sup>. TCH has made a commitment to creating inclusive housing environments for tenants with limited English proficiency through their *Translation and Interpretation Policy*<sup>19</sup>. This policy ensures that translation and/or interpretation services are provided at the building, community, and organizational level to enable tenant participation and maximize their understanding of matters impacting their tenancy.

In 2016, the City of Toronto put forward recommendations to promote transformative change in TCH in order to “*strengthen and support the delivery of housing to residents, now and in the future*”<sup>20</sup>. A key focus of the city’s work has been to improve living conditions and services for older tenants<sup>14,21</sup>. Recommendations included the creation of a standalone older adult housing and services entity (now called Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation) that is responsible for the management and operation of the 83 “seniors-designated” buildings from TCH<sup>14,22</sup>. This new corporation is also responsible for implementing the *Integrated Service Model*, which aims to create high-quality housing services tailored to the needs of older tenants to promote aging in place<sup>14</sup>.

Tenant communication was identified as a key policy area of the *Integrated Service Model*<sup>3</sup>, and city wished to revise existing policies to be more responsive to the unique challenges faced by older tenants. The diversity of languages spoken among older adults in these buildings suggests that when planning and providing language access services it will be critical to understand existing challenges faced by those with limited English proficiency. Furthermore, effective interventions will require an accurate understanding of language needs across different buildings and regions. This should be followed by the development of targeted strategies to offer supports in appropriate languages.

## METHODS

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This paper draws on data from a study investigating the experiences of older tenants in social housing and the service providers who support them. Language barriers were identified as a key factor impacting successful tenancies for those with limited English proficiency. Therefore, a qualitative descriptive approach<sup>23,24</sup> was used to elicit a concise yet descriptively rich understanding of these barriers in order to develop recommendations that remain true to participants' views and experiences<sup>25</sup>.

### Participants:

Two study populations were recruited for the project: i) older tenants (aged 59+) living in TCH and their family members and ii) service providers who support older tenants on-site.

Older adult tenants (n=58) were recruited through English, Chinese, and Tamil posters shared in the common areas of TCH buildings (e.g., recreation room, elevators). To support the recruitment of linguistically diverse tenants, two bilingual/multilingual interviewers fluent in Tamil/English and Cantonese/Mandarin/English (reflecting some of the most spoken languages at TCH) joined the research team. Sessions were conducted in English, Tamil, Mandarin, or Cantonese.

Service providers (n=58) were recruited through a variety of methods, including word of mouth and posters that were shared with members of the Toronto Seniors Strategy Accountability Table as well as a variety of municipal departments, and health and community support service agencies known to operate within the buildings. Additionally, the research team partnered with two organizations that provide services across the city to invite frontline staff to attend a pre-scheduled focus group (two per agency).

### Data collection:

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups that took place between November 2019 and February 2020. Sessions explored the challenges older tenants faced managing their tenancies and what changes were needed to improve their housing experience. Probes were used to explore the impact of language barriers on tenancy management (e.g., annual rent review), interactions with staff, participation in tenant communities, and access to community supports.

Interviews were conducted either by phone or in-person at an agreed-upon location, while focus groups were facilitated in community rooms at TCH buildings (tenants) and local agencies (service providers). All sessions lasted approximately 1-hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts from non-English interviews were professionally translated and subsequently reviewed by the interviewers for accuracy. All participants received an honorarium as a thank-you.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the Sunnybrook Research Institute (Project Identification Number 308-2019).

## **Analytic approach:**

The research team conducted inductive thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns relating to language barriers<sup>26</sup>. The research team followed a systematic selection process to review and discuss the components of each theme and came to a consensus on the selection of the most significant themes. These themes were then used to determine main language barriers faced by older tenants with limited English proficiency. Qualitative analysis software NVivo12 was used to facilitate data management and collaborative coding among the research team.



# FINDINGS

In total, 58 tenants from diverse backgrounds participated in the study, including 14 tenants who spoke Chinese languages and 3 who were Tamil speakers. Tenant characteristics, including living arrangements and length of tenancy, are shown in Table 1. A more comprehensive discussion on demographic characteristics of tenants is available<sup>27</sup>. While most tenants reported living alone, more than half of Chinese and Tamil speaking tenants lived with a spouse or an adult child. For all tenants, the average length of tenancy was about nine years; however, Tamil-speaking tenants reported relatively longer tenancy (ranging from eight years to 19 years), whereas Chinese-speaking tenants reported relatively shorter tenancy (ranging from four months to 25 years, with an average of four years).

Additionally, 58 service providers participated in the study. There was a mix of management (n=10) and frontline (n=48) staff, including nurses, geriatric psychiatrists, social workers, care coordinators, community program staff and housing workers. They represented the variety of health, housing, and community programs that support older adults living in TCH.

**Table 1: Characteristics of older adult tenants**

Characteristics	
<b>Age</b>	70.4 ± 8.4 years (57 – 92 years)
<b>Sex</b>	50% male
<b>Proportion Living Alone</b>	78%
<b>Average Length of Tenancy</b>	9.1 ± 8.4 years (3 months – 38 years)
<b>Region of City</b>	31% North East 14% North West 50% South East 5% South West
<b>Language of Interview</b>	English: 41 tenants Chinese: 14 tenants Tamil: 3 tenants

## Language barriers experienced by older tenants with limited English proficiency

Four main language barriers faced by older tenants with limited English proficiency were identified. First, the challenges that older tenants and service providers faced accessing information about their building, unit maintenance, and tenancy were examined. Second, communication between housing staff and tenants was explored, highlighting current strategies to bridge language gaps and the need for enhanced language supports. Third, the role of informal support was examined as a technique for addressing older tenants’ translation and interpretation needs. Finally, older tenants’ experiences accessing health care and other community support services were explored to gain insight into practices that support health and well-being.

## Accessing housing information - “They’re all in English. We don’t understand!”

### Barriers to access information about the building

Access to building level information, such as power outages, unit maintenance, and community events, was identified as crucial for all older tenants, as it directly affected their daily lives. Participants described a variety of communication channels used by housing staff to share this pertinent information, including notices posted on bulletin boards, letters sent directly to tenants, or verbal communication by housing staff around the building. However, most communication was said to occur in English, which participants felt made it difficult for tenants with limited English proficiency to understand their messages.

Most Chinese-speaking participants reported limited English proficiency, and they raised concerns about the limited access to building-related information in a language they understand. Even though many of these participants lived in a building where “one third are Cantonese speaking, one-third are mandarin speaking and one third are non-Chinese speaking” (T54, age 78, Chinese speaker), written and verbal communications from housing staff were delivered in English only. One tenant shared their frustration with English-only notices and announcements for the matters deemed important:



*“Sometimes they would send us notices about things like water or power outages. They should be written in Chinese as well as in English. But they are all in English. Most of the people living here are Chinese old ladies. We don’t understand. Just like the PA announcements. We don’t understand.”*

*(T47, age 83, Chinese speaker)*

Frustration about the public announcements was echoed by another Mandarin-speaking tenant who requested Chinese-language announcements for emergency situations. For this tenant, fears about safety were rooted in their inability to understand if an announcement was about a fire in the building. When asked about her reactions when hearing English announcements, this tenant responded, “Just ignore them! [Laughter] What can you do?” (T54, age 78, Chinese speaker)

Tenants also raised concerns about the English-only signage around the building, like emergency exit and fire safety signs. They highlighted the need for signage in accessible languages to increase readability. In addition to making signs in multiple languages, a Chinese-speaking tenant suggested using symbols and accessible designs to address language barriers for tenants with limited English proficiency:



*“There is a sign on our door, but it is in English. I looked it up. It actually reads, ‘Have you turned off your stove yet?’ So, this is a reminder for you, before you go out. I changed the sign myself by crossing out the text and replacing it with the drawing of a flame. When I see the flame, I will remember to go back and check the stoves [...] They did put up a reminder there, but it is in English, and the text is so small that you can barely read it. [...] Many Chinese don’t understand English. It is pointless to put up such a sign. [...] Just have the word ‘Fire’ in a big font size. For Chinese, just write the word ‘Fire’ in Chinese. Simple.”*

(T47, age 83, Chinese speaker)

While most Chinese-speaking tenants reported their need for both written and oral communication supports, other tenants discussed that translation and interpretation needs varied. For example, Tamil-speaking participants were all fluent speakers of English. Another English-speaking tenant also described how Greek-speaking tenants in their building were fluent in oral but not written English, and highlighted an example where housing staff misunderstood the language needs of this community when hosting a community meeting:



*“But Housing will not create a sign in Greek. Even though the Greek leader has affirmed to me that interpretation would not be necessary, the Greeks understand English, they just can’t read the sign. Housing consistently fails to provide Greek translation for the sign. And then they send an interpreter, and we say, why [...] did you send an interpreter when the Greeks didn’t know they were invited specifically? [...] Two meetings have happened. The interpreter shows up and we say, no Greek speakers are here because there was no sign.”*

(T15, age 77, English speaker)

Although TCH provides some translation and interpretation support, several participants highlighted the limitations in current translation and interpretation practices. For example, while the notices on the bulletin board typically included a line indicating available over-the-phone interpretation support, this information was written in English only. To address the language gap, service providers described collaborative efforts with housing staff to post multi-language flyers and notices, yet there were difficulties getting translation supports on time and in multiple languages.



*“In an ideal situation, the [housing provider] event planner will arrange for translation of the posters that we put in the lobby. On the day of [our event], translators will show up. [...] But sometimes the language component isn’t arranged for us [and] it’s just like pulling teeth, you know, for a request to get a poster translated. [...] [Sometimes] a tenant representative has been able to translate for us.”*

(SP4, Community Educator)

### **Barriers to access information about tenancy**

Important notices related to tenancy matters, such as annual review packages and eviction notices, are delivered by mail. Both tenants and service providers raised concerns about this practice, feeling that mailed letters were not effective for sharing important information with older tenants. The letters were often described as not ‘senior friendly’ and most tenants, even English-speaking older tenants, had difficulties understanding the messages. As highlighted by one service provider: “I’ve got English speaking clients who are like, what do these letters mean? They have no idea.” (SP37, Service Coordinator). Another said,



*“Their mandate is to support people to stay in housing, to keep their RGI [rent-geared-to-income] and all this stuff, but a lot of times there’s too much emphasis like with the older clients on like ‘oh, we’ve sent them letters, we’ve sent them letters, we’ve sent them letters.’ Well, a lot of people don’t understand their mail, don’t read their mail. They just like, it’s too wordy, the language is a barrier, they got a cognitive problem.”*

(SP6, Social Worker)

Language barriers also made it more difficult for tenants to stay informed about tenancy matters. For example, notices on the bulletin board about upcoming annual review submissions were posted in English only, and tenants were not provided with adequate information in accessible languages to help them complete the required documents. Service providers also shared their frustrations over the lack of language supports provided directly from housing to tenants, as noted by one participant:



*“I went to this building, and this client of mine [...] he’s Russian/Ukrainian speaking [...] there was a representative from TCH, and she said to me, ‘well, he hasn’t done his [annual] review, can you get that done?’ I’m thinking, ‘well that’s not my job’ and she gave me a list of things [...] So, a week later, I went back and there was a sign next to the elevator about completing your review, because someone is coming. But if you can’t read English, how would you know this review was being done today?”*

(SP34, Service Coordinator)

Participants discussed how important notices related to tenancy matters are mailed with a cover letter noting that translation and interpretation services are available if needed; however, this information was provided in English. When speaking of the lease and other tenancy-related documents, one Chinese-speaking tenant spoke about language barriers in written communication and how they delay fulfilling their tenant responsibilities:



*“Because it [the lease] is in English, but we speak Mandarin. First, we can’t read it. Second, we don’t understand what people are saying. We need someone to help [...] They should consider using various languages, for example, Chinese or other languages. If you’re Chinese, they should accommodate. The official language in Canada is English. So, we can’t expect them to always provide Chinese translation...[but] I don’t understand anything they send us. Sometimes that does hold things up.”*

(T43, age 68, Chinese speaker)

### **Language barriers when communicating with housing staff - “Can we have someone who speaks Chinese?”**

Talking to housing staff was described as an everyday challenge for tenants who could not speak English fluently. Chinese-speaking tenants reported that they often failed to communicate directly with their superintendents about maintenance issues, like a broken fridge or a leaky sink. They also expressed their frustrations about the lack of consideration for those with limited English proficiency when offering housing supports. For example, a Mandarin-speaking tenant couple shared their experiences trying to communicate with English-speaking housing staff to request a parking spot. After multiple failed attempts applying for the parking spot by themselves, this couple resorted to asking their bilingual neighbour to help them.



*“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 is that she speaks English. We Chinese have no way to communicate with her. She comes once a month, which is great. When she came, we told her we would like to apply for a parking spot. [...] She sent us to an office in a seniors' building in downtown. It turned out that people there were also English-speaking. We could not communicate.”*

*(T44, age 65, Chinese speaker)*

To overcome language barriers, participants discussed how superintendents frequently asked for interpretation supports from bilingual tenant representatives or health care providers who were on site. They also used their cell phones to translate conversations with tenants. Some service providers also developed their own personal language inventory to note their colleagues' diverse language skills and relied on this informal network to translate flyers and communicate with tenants. While TCH does have interpretation services to support staff and tenants, participants noted these services were not widely accessed because they required time to arrange. This limited their ability to access services as quickly as needed.

In addition to enhanced interpretation supports for staff-to-tenant communication, many Chinese-speaking tenants reported that on-site bilingual staff would be ideal, especially for those living in buildings where Cantonese and Mandarin were main languages. Several tenants also talked about potential benefits of having tenant representatives from diverse linguistic groups to help bridge the language gap between housing staff and tenants. One Chinese-speaking tenant suggested that housing staff could *“proactively tell them [bilingual representatives] what they want to broadcast”* (T53, age 79, Chinese speaker). This was supposed by service providers, who also suggested establishing a consistent practice of recruiting bilingual or multilingual tenant representatives as a mechanism to strengthen communication.

### **Communicating through informal support – “We have to bother other people to help us.”**

When the communications were made in English only, tenants with limited English proficiency often sought help from their informal networks to understand delivered messages. Family members, usually adult children, were identified as a crucial source of communication support for many Chinese-speaking and Tamil-speaking tenants. When maintenance issues arose, tenants with limited English proficiency called their children to write a note or talk to their superintendent in English. Adult children also helped translate letters and fill out forms sent by the housing provider. For example, in an interview with a Chinese-speaking older tenant and her son, the bilingual son noted that without his support, his mother would not be informed about unit maintenance or leasing issues. He also helped her access community supports, schedule medical appointments, and arrange transportation.

Many tenants with limited English proficiency highlighted that they would prefer to have formal communication supports so that they did not have to bother their children frequently. Some tenants also mentioned that they could not get support from family when needed as their children were busy with their own lives or lived far away.

Bilingual neighbours were another source of support for tenants with limited English proficiency. For example, a Mandarin-speaking couple received help from their neighbour when they had to communicate with housing staff regarding changes in their rent due to job loss. This couple first felt that “there’s no way we could explain [this situation] to [the office]” due to the language barrier. They then contacted their bilingual neighbour who helped them write an email in English to the management office. This source of informal communication support, however, also 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. [...] That’s why, even though [neighbour] loves to help people and he certainly knows English, his Chinese is still insufficient. Our communication still does not go very smoothly.”*

*(T44, age 65 and T43, age 68, Chinese speakers)*

When the couple discovered this language gap, they called their bilingual son in China to communicate with their neighbour in English, and then explain it back to the couple in Mandarin. Although they were grateful for their neighbour, they mentioned that this language barrier made them feel helpless. They wanted to see some initiatives, like a translated website, that could facilitate barrier-free access for tenants speaking languages other than English:



*“If it were in Chinese, I can totally deal with it myself. I can handle it myself. [...] if a lot of the residents here are Chinese, shouldn’t you develop a website in Chinese for the seniors to use? If there is a website in Chinese, I can totally handle the whole thing myself. I won’t need others to help.”*

*(T44, age 68, Chinese speaker)*

While most Chinese-speaking and Tamil-speaking participants reported receiving extensive support from their family and neighbours, service providers indicated that many older tenants with limited English proficiency lived without reliable support from family or other informal networks. To fill the information gap, participants highlighted the need for more proactive information sharing initiated by housing providers in accessible languages. For example, a family member pointed out the need for organized information sessions in multiple languages, offered across buildings:



*“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. There is no way for them to find out or make use of services provided by the government or community centres. That's why I said there's a need for talks. [...]If you can work with the different social welfare organizations [...] to set a specific goal to organize talks, in different languages, or with translation [...] to explain to people the kinds of government-sponsored services that are currently available to them and ask them about the kinds of services that they need.”*

*(T51, age 58, Chinese speaker)*

Echoing the concerns raised by this tenant, many service providers talked about the need for targeted supports for tenants who do not speak English fluently, particularly those who live with limited or no informal support. They agreed it would improve tenants' access to needed health care and other community supports. Service providers also suggested that enhanced language supports targeted to improving access to information could benefit the tenants who heavily rely on informal support as it would reduce their need to rely on family members.

### **Accessing health care and other community supports – “There’s really no one there to help them navigate through the [health care] system.”**

In addition to the informal support, several Chinese-speaking tenants relied heavily on supports offered by community agencies that specifically served Chinese-Canadian communities. Chinese-speaking staff in these agencies helped older tenants with a wide range of written communication, such as tax filing, permanent resident card application, license plate renewal, and driver's license renewal. Bilingual staff in these agencies also offered help with oral communication such as booking doctor's appointments over the phone. For many, these agencies provided crucial supports to fill the gap in tenants' daily communication needs. Yet, it was not a shared experience for tenants to seek support from these agencies to communicate with housing staff for maintenance or other tenancy issues, like reporting an income change or completing the annual rent review.

For tenants who were not well connected with such community supports or informal networks, the lack of English proficiency made it more difficult for them to maintain their health and well-being. Stories shared



by service providers highlighted the pressing need for addressing these language barriers as they significantly affect their use of health services and community supports. For example, one staff from a supportive housing program noted the impact of limited linguistically appropriate care for a tenant with limited English proficiency:



*“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.”*

(SP54, Supportive Housing Nurse)

In the absence of family support, this service provider offered extended supports to book appointments but still had to rely on Korean-speaking staff from other community-based programs to inform the client that she made the appointments.

Discussing the need for better communication support for housing staff and tenants with limited English proficiency, several service providers noted that the implementation of the integrated service model was an opportunity to address these language barriers. They suggested that enhancing translation and interpretation supports available for older tenants, as well as service providers, could help tenants access housing, health, and other community support services. As well, for housing staff, seeking opportunities to work with established community agencies that support various linguistic community members, as presented in the stories shared by Chinese-speaking tenants, was identified as a promising strategy. This strategy could help tenants with limited English proficiency better connect with available housing supports as well as health and community services.

## DISCUSSION

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The narratives shared by tenants and service providers illustrate the challenges faced by older tenants living in social housing with limited English proficiency. The consequences of these language barriers were substantial. They experienced day-to-day challenges accessing housing information in a language they understand, and they often encountered barriers communicating directly with housing staff and other service providers. Those experiencing language barriers felt excluded, disempowered, and discouraged from seeking help or accessing needed care and supports. Informal language supports, such as relying on their children or neighbours, also fell short. Service providers from various sectors also reported challenges providing adequate supports for older tenants with limited English proficiency due to the limited availability of translation and interpretation support.

Findings in this study confirm previous Canadian and international studies which also identified language barriers as a key factor impacting accessing housing, health care, and other community services among people with limited English proficiency. A 2016 report by the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, for example, identified immigrant older adults with limited official language proficiency as a group of social housing tenants facing an elevated risk of negative housing and health outcomes<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, evidence from international literature clearly shows how language barriers impact people's access to housing information and available resources that enable them to maintain their unit and manage their tenancy. For instance, the Communities for Housing Equity Coalition's 2006 report found that immigrants and those with limited English proficiency in New York were more likely to live in unhealthy and unsafe living conditions and were overwhelmingly not informed about services to address their housing needs<sup>28</sup>. Even when they had access to support services, the lack of comprehensive and consistent language support created barriers to effective service implementation and timely correction of their housing problems<sup>28</sup>. Similarly, a 2015 Report by CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities and Urban Justice Centre highlighted access barriers for Asian tenants with limited English proficiency when requesting a repair, communicating with housing staff, and providing feedback on their experience<sup>29</sup>. This report also pointed out that despite New York City Housing Authority's policy that discouraged informal interpretation and translation, most tenants still relied on their family and friends due to the limited formal supports available for language access.

Further, a growing body of literature has documented language barriers in the context of health and social care. Kalich et al.'s scoping review of immigrant experience of health care access identified language as one of the most common access barriers for immigrants in Canada<sup>6</sup>. Wellesley Institute's previous work also found that in the Greater Toronto Area, older adults whose mother tongue was not English were less likely to receive government-funded home care services, and more heavily rely on informal support to meet their home care needs<sup>30</sup>. A follow-up study found that immigrant older adults with limited English proficiency experienced difficulties accessing information, navigating the system, and finding home care service providers to accommodate their linguistic and cultural needs<sup>31,32</sup>. Language barriers not only limited what immigrant older adults could access, but also often left them dependent on family caregivers who had to serve as interpreters and knowledge brokers on top of their role as a main care provider<sup>31,32</sup>. Ahmed et al.'s literature review on barriers to access of primary health care by immigrant populations highlighted the shortfalls of using such informal supports as translators in the health care settings as it could lead to feelings of discomfort, confidentiality concerns, cultural stigma, and translation/interpretation errors from not knowing medical terminology<sup>2</sup>. Wellesley Institute's scoping review of international literature on the effectiveness of language interpretation services suggested that they have a measurable impact on the

clinical and patient outcomes, and trained interpreters were more effective than untrained interpreters or none at all<sup>33</sup>.

Findings from the current study suggest that the existing translation and interpretation policies are not executed in full. Collecting data on tenant's language of preference was not a routine practice across the buildings. Furthermore, existing practices often fell short, as written communication was delivered in English only, and tenants were not well informed about available language access supports, such as the over-the-phone interpretation services. Both tenants and service providers shared their views on the need for more proactive, consistent, targeted communication efforts that reflect the diverse linguistic needs of older tenants.

## Recommendations

With the advent of the Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation<sup>22</sup>, there is an opportunity to review existing language services and processes to implement a more coordinated approach to meet the diverse linguistic needs of older tenants. Specifically, five areas of improvement have been identified to enhance supports for tenants with limited English proficiency. These recommendations reflect the specific needs of this community and aim to improve access to the housing, health, and community supports that optimize aging in place.

### 1) Enhance data collection and utilization of tenant's language of preference

An enhanced language data collection system should be implemented to record and track language profiles for all tenants. This language data should reflect each tenant's language preference and English proficiency levels for written and oral communication. Such data would provide an accurate understanding of individual needs as well as building-level language profiles. The data could be collected and updated regularly, for example, through the initial lease signing and annual Tenants' Needs Assessment, annual unit inspection or annual rent review processes, and made available to housing staff and community partners to inform the service planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Co-designing these tools and processes with older tenants will be essential for fostering buy-in and ensuring that tenants are comfortable providing and sharing this information with partners<sup>34</sup>.

### 2) Develop strategies to provide proactive language access services

With the enhanced language data collection, more proactive service planning could be made to meet the needs of older tenants with limited English proficiency. This could include:

- Making communication of vital documents (e.g., annual rent review packages, lease, eviction notices, water/power outages, emergency exit signage) more accessible by using graphic presentations, accessible writing, video and audio adaptations, and translation that aligns with the linguistic profile of the building.
- Developing procedures to increase the linguistic diversity of housing staff by designating proficiency in non-official languages as an asset. This may allow for housing workers to provide more proactive communication in diverse languages on relevant building-wide issues such as water shut-offs, maintenance requests, and community events.

- Ensuring that community events (e.g., presentations, information sessions) and initiatives (e.g., newsletters) include interpretation and/or translation supports in languages spoken by tenants in the building.

### **3) Provide staff training to ensure that all housing staff have the tools they need to best serve tenants with limited English proficiency**

Mandatory staff training would ensure that all staff serving older tenants have the tools they need to best serve those with limited English proficiency. At minimum, this training must include guidelines on when formal translation services are required (e.g., when translating tenancy documents), how to access these services, strategies to work effectively with interpreters, and lists of local agencies that specialize in providing linguistically appropriate services to older adults.

### **4) Proactively share information with tenants in languages they understand**

Proactive information sharing in accessible languages would ensure tenants have access to important information about their housing. This includes their rights and responsibilities as tenants, and the available resources that can support their housing and health needs. Information about available translation and interpretation services could be communicated individually as part of an in-take and annual review process and/or could be posted across buildings. This information could also be translated to the most-spoken languages in each building.

To inform tenants about health care and other community services, information sessions could be organized and delivered by the staff who speak the languages of the targeted tenant audience or through pre-arranged interpreters. Efforts could also be made to disseminate information about these sessions in the languages of the target audience. Collaborating with community agencies serving immigrants and specific linguistic groups could be an effective strategy to aid in the dissemination of information to tenants with limited English proficiency and ensure they can access these services in their preferred language.

### **5) Facilitate engagement with older tenants with limited English proficiency in service monitoring and evaluation processes**

All tenant activities and community events should make targeted efforts to meaningfully engage with and actively seek feedback from older tenants with limited English proficiency. For example, interpretation and translation supports should be used to encourage the participation of older tenants with limited English proficiency. In addition, multilingual tenant representatives reflecting the linguistic diversity of their community could play a vital role in tenant communications and engagement. Finally, efforts could be made to reduce language barriers around filing complaints or providing feedback about housing services by offering information sessions specifically about such process in multiple languages. Ensuring that bilingual/multilingual staff or interpreters are available for tenants to communicate their feedback directly, posting translated posters about the complaints process around the buildings or on the housing website, and making online complaint or feedback forms accessible in multiple languages are some ways to maximize communication between tenants and their housing provider.

## Strengths and limitations

A notable strength of this study is the large sample, which revealed a set of rich and diverse stories from the perspectives of tenants and health and community service providers who support them. However, there are some sample limitations that must be acknowledged. First, most of the tenants that were interviewed spoke English. Furthermore, the tenants with limited English proficiency were from Chinese- and Tamil-speaking communities, which may not represent the experiences of tenants who speak other non-English languages, including Francophone tenants, who may have different experiences accessing translation and interpretation services. Second, none of the service providers that were interviewed were part of community support service agencies that targeted services to specific linguistic communities. Staff at such agencies may have more nuanced insights into the experiences of tenants with limited English proficiency and may have other strategies they implement to overcome language barriers between tenants and housing staff. Third, this study also did not include the perspectives of housing staff who are responsible for designing and implementing translation and interpretation policies and procedures. Furthermore, data were collected from tenants and service providers living and working in TCH buildings, and their experiences may not reflect those of other housing providers who may have different language-access policies. Data were also collected prior to both the implementation of the *Integrated Service Model* and the launch of the Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation. Thus, experiences of language barriers may have changed. Housing managers and frontline staff working with older adult tenants at TCH and the new housing corporation were consulted in the development of the recommendations to ensure their relevance to current practice.

## CONCLUSION

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The linguistic diversity of the City of Toronto is well reflected among older adults living in social housing in Toronto. As the City of Toronto continues to improve housing services for low-income older adults it is important to ensure that such services and programs are accessible for all tenants, regardless of their spoken languages. To improve housing experiences for tenants with limited English proficiency, targeted interventions should be made to address the language barriers these tenants face. As shown in this study, language barriers impact tenants' ability to understand crucial housing matters, and can impact their well-being, safety, tenancy, and access to supports. Language barriers can also affect tenants' sense of belonging to their housing community. The recommendations provided here are intended to guide housing providers in the creation of equitable tenant communities, where tenants with limited English proficiency are not left behind.

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