

# visions

Vol. 14 No. 4 2019

## rethinking housing



The high stakes of  
housing affordability

Surviving a renovation

## visions

Published quarterly, *Visions* is a national award-winning journal that provides a forum for the voices of people experiencing a mental health or substance use problem, their family and friends, and service providers in BC. It creates a place where many perspectives on mental health and substance use issues can be heard. *Visions* is produced by the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information and funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, a program of the Provincial Health Services Authority.

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*We would like to acknowledge that the coordination and production of this issue of Visions Journal took place on unceded Coast Salish territory.*

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# visions

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## letter to the editor



Thank you very much for addressing this issue (*Language we use*, Vol 14 No 1). I was somewhat disappointed that none of the writers mentioned a problem that has been bothering me for years. The term “schizophrenic” has been used incorrectly in modern literature and in newspaper articles. I have spoken to people about this and even wrote a letter to then-editor of the *Vancouver Sun*, Patricia Graham, who agreed with me that the term is often used to express duality of thought or confusion about two different points of view. I do not know how to change this incorrect use of language and want to point out that I have read writings using the term from people who are considered very intelligent but still get it wrong. I also told a fellow classmate in a diversity course I took in the late 1990s-early 2000s that he was using the term incorrectly and was chastised for it by the facilitator of the course for “educating” someone.

—Barb Bawlf, Smithers, BC

## editor's message

The last issue of *Visions* looked at loneliness and social connection. Given our homes are an extension of ourselves and our networks, you will see that theme pop up several times in this issue, too. Housing is about so much more than just shelter: Our homes are integral to our mental, physical, economic and social well-being.

I know I am privileged to live in a small urban townhouse. One of my relatives likes to tell me if she won the lottery she would buy me a detached single-family house: to her, that's the pinnacle of housing and what everyone must aspire to. I've tried to explain to her why that's not ideal for me or even sustainable for the planet anymore. I love not having to drive everywhere and being a 3-min walk to a school and park, but mainly I love the sense of community on my street and all the people I run into on the sidewalks. I have the kind of neighbours whose kids play with my kids daily. (We've even joked that one 8-year-old is like Kramer (of *Seinfeld* fame) because she'll stick her head through our kitchen window unannounced sometimes!) I have people a few metres away who I can relate to, who I can borrow and loan stuff to, who'll dogsit. The homes are all so close together and near the road that I never feel scared walking alone at night (except when urban coyotes are out stalking). Our mortgage doesn't break the bank. Every housing type has its drawbacks, but basically I feel safe, happy and connected in my home. Everyone should have that feeling.

The housing affordability crisis is forcing us to rethink housing solutions. Ideal housing looks different for everyone. In the pages ahead, you'll meet courageous people like David who felt pushed toward a bachelor (single-room) apartment when all he ever wanted was his motorhome. You'll find out why Holly gave up a fancier house for low-income housing or Lorna's dream to just be treated fairly by her landlord. Housing without a support worker alongside likely won't help Dale's clients. You'll read how youth and older adults are living together in new and creative ways. And how there is more demand for tiny homes and co-housing communities. We can't keep assuming the kinds of housing people want. What people want and deserve are real choices—affordable choices, sustainable choices and choices that give them freedom and connection to the people and supports that matter.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Hamid-Balma'.

Sarah Hamid-Balma

*Sarah is Visions Editor and Director of Mental Health Promotion at the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division*

# How did we get here?

## HOUSING POLICY AND THE AFFORDABLE-HOUSING CRISIS

Marika Albert, MA\*

Everyone in British Columbia deserves to live in a safe, secure home. I will consider how we got to the housing crisis we are facing today and reflect on the impact this crisis has had—and continues to have—on communities across BC. I then provide some thoughts on policy that could really help.



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*\*The views expressed in this editorial are the views of the author and not necessarily the views of the BCNPHA*

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A tent under the Granville Street Bridge

One of my favourite housing researchers, David Hulchanski, often talks about how Canada provides adequately for the market aspect of housing but ignores the social aspect of housing.<sup>2</sup> His insight highlights the importance of looking at housing as a social need that is central to people's health and well-being, one that should be supported by public funds and not left to the market to provide. Relying on the market to provide housing makes it almost impossible for low-income households to participate. This means that low-income households face serious challenges in securing safe and affordable housing—which has an impact on the mental, emotional and physical health of household members.

Today's housing crisis is the culmination of policy decisions made at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, combined with broader economic trends both locally and globally. Conscious policy decisions made at critical times over the past several decades favoured the consumer market, providing housing mainly in the form of private home-ownership opportunities.

### Poor policy at the root of the crisis

Since the mid-20th century and possibly earlier, federal and provincial governments have directed public funds to incentivize home ownership. In 1946, as part of the response to the aftermath of World War II, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation began to offer

home-ownership incentive programs, enabling first-time buyers to obtain a mortgage more easily than before. Subsequently, similar types of programs were refined and developed federally and provincially to continue to privilege home ownership over other forms of tenure.<sup>3</sup> As a result, 67% of Canadian households are now homeowners, while only 32% of households are renters<sup>4</sup> (although this trend has started to reverse as the possibility of home ownership becomes increasingly out of reach for many households).

From the 1970s to the early 1980s, the federal government did provide incentives to increase the supply of purpose-built rental housing, but these programs dried up in the 1980s, making it no longer attractive for developers to undertake these projects.<sup>5</sup> This has also been a major contributing factor to the current housing crisis, as many

communities do not have enough affordable rental-housing stock to meet the growing demand for rental housing options.<sup>6</sup>

In BC particularly, a number of provincial policies have had a negative impact on housing affordability. For example, in 2002, the then Liberal government amended the Residential Tenancy Act so that there were no longer limits on how much a landlord could increase the rent on a unit that had been vacated. This legislative loophole enabled landlords to increase rent at a much faster rate than before, and encouraged the practice of “renoviction,” where a landlord evicts a tenant under the guise of performing major renovations, and then increases the rent once the renovations have been completed. Renovictions are particularly a problem in rental-housing markets with very low vacancy rates, as is the case in the Lower Mainland, the Sunshine Coast, and Southern Vancouver Island.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, international investors increasingly began to use BC’s housing market as an investment opportunity, moving capital out of their home countries and buying up real estate in southwestern British Columbia.<sup>8</sup> There were few barriers in place to prevent overseas, non-resident buyers from purchasing BC real estate, and market prices increased as foreign sales increased.

Another policy that favoured the consumer market was the creation of a new type of housing: the condominium, or condo. Condos did not exist in Canada before the mid-1970s. The introduction of the condo meant that home ownership was suddenly a possibility for households that had

previously been typically unable to afford a detached home. Federal, provincial and municipal government policies offered various incentive and tax-based programs to encourage the construction of condos. Because condos are typically multi-unit residential apartment buildings where the units are owned rather than rented, they generate a greater profit for developers.<sup>2</sup>

Rezoning for condominium development was often not required because many municipalities already had the appropriate zoning for multi-unit residential apartment buildings. But an unintended consequence of the creation of condo buildings was that comparatively fewer purpose-built rental buildings were built. This is still a significant contributing factor in the current housing crisis. In 1990, construction was begun on 10,315 condominium buildings but only 2,122 rental buildings across BC. In 2017, construction began on 20,136 condos but only 8,370 rental buildings.<sup>9</sup>

Various municipal land use policies also privileged home ownership over other forms of tenure, such as renting and cooperative housing options. The majority of neighbourhoods in Canadian cities are zoned to allow only single-detached, single-family dwellings. It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish purpose-built, multi-unit rental buildings in these neighbourhoods. To do so, developers must submit rezoning applications to the municipality. These rezoning applications often face major challenges.

**The Not-In-My-Backyard effect**  
At the BC Non-Profit Housing Association, we often hear from

## glossary

### **Purpose-built rental housing**

refers to apartment buildings that are built for the sole purpose of providing long-term, secure rental housing. Purpose-built rental buildings are built mainly by private developers and differ from **condo buildings**, where the intent from the outset is ownership of each individual unit.

**Housing cooperatives** are a type of housing that is collectively owned by a membership-based corporation. Housing co-ops provide at-cost housing for members and are managed by members, who have a say in decision-making that affects the co-op. There is no outside landlord in a housing cooperative.<sup>1</sup>

members facing challenges during the rezoning processes from people who don't want multi-unit dwellings in their neighbourhood. Typically, we see such NIMBYism (that all-too-familiar Not-In-My-Backyard attitude) at its harshest when our members are attempting to build more supportive types of housing, such as housing for individuals struggling with addictions or living with mental health challenges. Neighbours of proposed supportive-housing developments often use fear-mongering as a way to garner support to deny the rezoning application, which effectively stops construction. This kind of response has profound negative impacts on the health and well-being of marginalized people in our communities and prevents them from accessing stable and secure housing.

We have also heard from association members who face NIMBYism in their attempts to build housing for low-income seniors and families. The complaints from neighbours and the comments from elected officials may focus on land use issues, but the sentiment is often thinly veiled prejudice against low-income individuals and families.<sup>10</sup>

While both federal and provincial levels of governments have contributed to the development of affordable housing for lower-income households and individuals in the past few decades, for the most part these programs have been short-lived and inadequate. Starting in the early 1970s, the federal government played an important role in providing funding for social housing and cooperatives, but it withdrew this support in the early 1990s. The BC provincial government also helped fund social

While the housing crisis seems overwhelming and inevitable, it doesn't have to be.

housing initiatives, particularly after the federal government passed on funding responsibilities to the provinces in the early 1990s, but up to this point, the programs have been insufficient to meet the growing demand for affordable rental housing.

### The income/cost disparity

What I haven't mentioned yet—although I think it's becoming obvious—is the relationship between housing and income. This relationship is one of the primary reasons that we need government to intervene with incentives and funding for affordable housing. Housing prices continue to rise, and households need increasingly higher incomes to purchase housing or even rent in some communities. But for the most part, household income has not kept pace with the increase in housing costs. In metropolitan Vancouver, for instance, the average price of an apartment increased by 45% between 2006 and 2016, while the average wage in BC increased by 26.6% during the same time period.<sup>11</sup> The Canadian Rental Housing Index, which uses census data to explore the experiences of renters in communities across Canada, shows that the housing affordability crisis is expanding out from the urban areas into more suburban and rural areas.<sup>12</sup> Poor housing policy, increased costs of living and inadequate wage increases have all contributed to the current affordable-housing crisis in BC. We clearly need a range of housing types, forms and tenure options to address the diverse needs of our communities.

### Looking ahead

While the housing crisis seems overwhelming and inevitable, it doesn't have to be. What will be important for the future of housing is recognizing that secure, safe housing is a social need. We must pressure our elected officials to make policy decisions that focus on security of housing tenure for everyone rather than policy decisions that rely on the market to provide housing.

I am very encouraged by the investment in affordable housing that we have seen recently at the provincial level with the provincial government's implementation of the Homes BC 30-Point Plan for Housing Affordability in BC.<sup>13</sup> Recent changes to the BC Residential Tenancy Act have strengthened protections for tenants against renovations and fixed-term tenancies.<sup>14</sup> The introduction of the foreign buyers tax to curb foreign investment and cool the housing market in BC is another positive policy change. I am also optimistic about what is happening at the federal level, with the recent introduction of the National Housing Strategy.<sup>15</sup>

I hope that continued investment, specifically in the community housing sector, will ensure that affordable housing is accessible to all residents, regardless of their income and need. That kind of access is what we need to effectively address this crisis. ▾

# The High Stakes of Housing Affordability

## HOUSING POLICY AND THE AFFORDABLE-HOUSING CRISIS

Nat Keeling

Last fall's municipal election coverage focused heavily on the issue of housing affordability in the Lower Mainland and the Fraser Valley. Many debates and panels floated possible solutions, with ideas ranging from working with various funders in order to build more below-market housing to forcibly relocating the homeless to vacant land without amenities in order to dismantle camps in public parks.

*Nat is currently completing their master's degree in social work. Upon graduating, they plan to continue working in the mental health and substance use field. Their interests include LGBTQAI2S+\* advocacy, mental wellness promotion, community building and affordable housing*

*Nat would like to thank Sandy Craig, Program Manager at Stepping Stone Community Services, for collaborating with them on this article and reviewing the draft*

*The letters and symbols in the abbreviation used by Nat stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, asexual and agender, intersex, two-spirit and other identities*



Photo credit: Steve Debenport at ©Stockphoto.com

Now that the municipal election has come and gone, the issue of housing affordability is less heavily featured in the news, but off-screen the problem is no less pressing than before. As a front-line social services worker with almost 10 years of experience working in the mental health, substance use and housing fields, I have been impacted by the housing crisis professionally and personally. In fact, the issue of affordable housing has shaped my whole career path. I began working in the field of social

services in 2009, first as a volunteer and then as a full-time employee. My work in mental health and addictions in residential settings took me to different agencies and across six different municipalities (Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminister, Surrey, Langley and Abbotsford). In each municipality, there was a common problem: a lack of affordable housing.

You may wonder how geographically and culturally different places like New Westminister and Abbotsford

can have such similar problems when it comes to housing. New Westminister is densely populated, land is expensive and the municipality has an established network of social services and a long history of press coverage and community discussions on homelessness and related social problems. Abbotsford is more sparsely populated and has cheaper land, and the city's social services are less developed. Its homeless population, while increasing, is not as large as that of New Westminister. Yet despite differences in geography, political affiliations, tax base and funding opportunities, most municipalities in BC have underdeveloped affordable housing strategies, leaving many people either homeless or in precarious housing situations.

A decade ago, the housing-market crash scared off many developers from committing to building affordable housing. Granted, this was a continuation of a trend: since the 1970s, very little below-market housing has been built anywhere in BC, as it is not seen as a high-profit-generating endeavour. Now, potential developers find there is a lack of affordable land on which to build and few supportive communities to build in.

There is a reluctance on the part of homeowner neighbours to welcome affordable housing options in their neighbourhoods—the Not-In-My-Backyard phenomenon. There is also a lack of political will at the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government to stand up and fight for affordable housing. Our current dire situation is a direct result of our governments doing nothing to

actively address the problem for such a long period of time.

One of the starkest illustrations of the damage caused by a long-term lack of affordable housing is the overdose crisis that has ravaged the Lower Mainland and the Fraser Valley in the past several years. While opioid use and overdose is on the rise even among those who are adequately housed,<sup>1</sup> it is clear that poor urban planning affects substance use patterns.

For example, when those who struggle with substance use issues successfully complete a course of treatment and are eager to stay sober, often they have no choice but to return to the streets because of the lack of available temporary and permanent affordable housing.<sup>2</sup> Living on the streets exposes people to unsafe drug use practices. Policies aimed at reducing the frequency of overdose have little impact if we do not also address the lack of affordable housing stock.

But while a lack of affordable housing undeniably affects the most vulnerable in our society, it also has an impact on our wider communities—including older adults and young families. As fewer and fewer can afford housing in urban centres, more people are forced into shelters or onto the streets, or must seek housing farther away from their work and school environments. This spreads our social services resources thin and places more pressure on our transit systems. Fewer resources and a longer commute mean less money and energy for building healthy community systems and less time at home, both of which have a negative impact on the physical and emotional well-being of our families and societies.

As a residential social services worker, I have worked in temporary shelters and transitional housing, treatment centres and, now, supportive housing. For many of my clients, the goal of finding and keeping housing is a constant source of stress. One client had to choose between going back to a shelter where her substance use had escalated in the past and returning to the home of an on-again, off-again boyfriend who essentially acted as her pimp. While I was looking online for accommodation for another client who had just completed a course of addiction treatment, I came across a housing advertisement that openly stated that anyone on social assistance should not bother applying.

More recently, one of my agency's clients received an eviction notice and was told to vacate the home on a day when temperatures fell below -10° Celsius. The local emergency shelter had only 10 mats on the floor for those in need, which were booked on a first-come, first-serve basis, and these had all been spoken for since mid-morning.

I often feel helpless when a client asks me to assist them to find housing because I know full well that there is almost nothing available in their price range. Social services workers like me are stuck trying to find housing for clients along a transit route—a job analogous to finding a needle in a haystack. It can be overwhelming to find and keep housing in communities that are all too often hostile towards people on social assistance, people with disabilities and people who appear to be using substances (regardless of whether or not they actually are).

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

# Child of the First Step

## FINDING SAFE, AFFORDABLE HOUSING WHILE LIVING WITH THE CHALLENGE OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Bryn Genelle Ditmars

In my adult life—perhaps in the life of every adult—the first step towards independence was the procuring of food, shelter and clothing. Currently, these basic amenities are well within my reach, but in my not-so-distant past, there were days when I was nearly homeless. And as I am a very domestic person by nature—I guess you might say I’m a bit of a homebody—having an abode is very important to me. My home is a firm foundation on which I build the rest of my life’s fundamental components.

*Bryn is an author, artist, peer support worker and public speaker living in Vancouver*



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Now, at the age of 40, living with a diagnosis of schizophrenia and temporal lobe epilepsy, I receive social assistance that helps to ensure that my basic needs are met. But let it be known that this was not always the case: I’ve spent time moving from commercial warehouses to illegal sublets to questionable places that accepted my under-the-table payments of rent.

I was born in Nelson, arriving in the world as the first-born son of a carpenter and a midwife. We lived in a small rented house on Granite Road, and then we moved to a shared property in a nearby valley where, at the tender age of five, I experienced what I understand in retrospect to be my first symptoms of mental illness. I heard voices that told me when I was going to die, as well as the name of my soulmate.

After my parents separated, we moved from the Kootenays to Vancouver. There, my father bought a house on the east side of the city, and my mother rented a place in a westside neighbourhood. My little brother and I went through elementary school and high school with all our basic needs provided for by our educated, middle-class family. Even though I experienced mild, periodic symptoms of paranoia in Grade 4, Grade 8 and Grade 11, I was a well-liked and functional child and adolescent as I took my first steps towards adulthood.

After I graduated, I was anticipating my big move from the metaphorical nest with a certain amount of dread. I had done well in school—I was gifted, though not without a significant amount of existential angst—and I decided to live in an old, unserviced log cabin on my father's property in the remote forests of the West Chilcotin because I was inspired to write epic poetry, alone with my muse. For money, I worked as a part-time carpenter's helper. Of all the places I've lived over the years, other than where I live currently, I suppose I was happiest living in that old cabin on that remote, rural ranch.

The next few years proved to be challenging, as I experienced mild psychosis frequently and battled with grandiose visions of my own importance in the world. In 1999, after going back and forth between country and city lifestyles, I arrived in Vancouver once again and moved into a non-residential Downtown Eastside space that had been turned into a temple—the house of a cult that had interested me for some time and of which I eventually became a member.

I felt like I belonged. In my life, I have learned that all human beings respond well to a sense of belonging. I'd had glimpses of achievement and belonging earlier in life, but now I really knew them.

I wanted to be immersed in the occult community, studying and teaching, both. I paid \$200 a month for a small windowless room.

Then, I adopted the rural lifestyle once more and moved back to the ranch to continue my writing. There, as before, I had the whole house to myself, although I had no electricity or running water—but I did have a radio phone for emergencies. When I left the ranch again, primarily with the naive and ambitious hope of getting my many books published, I ended up sharing a house with my girlfriend back in BC's largest city, near Commercial Drive, in the spring of 2001.

While living there, I was paying \$375 a month. But after using drugs—marijuana (cannabis) in particular—I got fired from my full-time job at a commercial art studio (where I was making tiles), most likely because of my disturbing behaviour (like claiming to be Mozart and dancing while I was working).

We ended up getting evicted because we couldn't pay the rent. My girlfriend then became pregnant, and I was mentally ill much of the time. Finding out that my girlfriend was pregnant was amazing, although I was rather young (22) to become a father.

Finally, after a long winter of anticipating fatherhood, viewed through the lens of chronic psychosis, I was working with my dad, building a house in Kamloops, when I was hospitalized due to a psychotic break. In the hospital, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. In some ways, when I heard my diagnosis, it felt like a big relief—both to my family and to me. Two months after my diagnosis, when I was living without a real home, I was quickly becoming a father. Needless to say, there was a lot to adjust to. Eventually, my condition stabilized enough that I was discharged from the hospital in Kamloops. That summer, my psychiatrist insisted that I go on disability, which was really the only way for me to afford a place for my small family. My girlfriend, our son and I returned to Vancouver, where we paid \$650 a month for a small attic suite on the west side of the city.

During the first two or three years of my son's life, I was hospitalized seven times. The side effects of my medication were unpleasant, so I would stop and start it, without physician supervision. I demonstrated dysfunctional behavioural patterns—I would carry a tape recorder around with me and record people's conversations, for example—and it was a challenge for anyone to be around me.

When our son turned one, my girlfriend and I spent the summer helping out on a ranch in one of the province's beautiful interior valleys. We then sublet a place on Salt Spring Island for a while, after which we repeatedly ended up living with friends and family members. Eventually we found a place on the Sunshine Coast for a whopping \$800, which we struggled to afford. That was where not one but two police incidents occurred, in the spring of 2005. I became violent and was arrested.

After spending six long months in a maximum-security psychiatric institution due to my violent behaviour, I was discharged and sent to live with my mother near Granville Island, although I was ordered to stay a safe distance from my girlfriend and our son. I also tried living with my brother for a time. I struggled to maintain a healthy lifestyle as I got back on my feet.

I received help from my case worker, who put my name on the waiting list for subsidized housing. In the meantime, I lived with my mother, and waited ... and waited ... and waited.

After nearly six long years, in the fall of 2014, I received a phone call from my case worker and was offered a suite in a nearby mental health housing facility. There, paying only \$375 a month and receiving supervision by caring medical professionals, I felt my spirit blossoming—and even found the time to write my memoir. The manager of the supported housing program conducted weekly meetings that I was required to attend, in the lounge common area of the building. My health improved—I was taking

medication regularly and was even able to quit smoking, something I'd been doing off and on for years. I had very little stress, and much support. I graduated from the supported housing program in 2016.

I remember that sense of achievement felt good. I felt as though I mattered. I felt as though my presence in the world was recognized. I felt like I belonged. In my life, I have learned that all human beings respond well to a sense of belonging. I'd had glimpses of achievement and belonging earlier in life, but now I really knew them.

Today, I am receiving a housing subsidy of \$425 every month from MPA Society, which provides housing support in the Greater Vancouver area. This makes it possible for me to rent a one-bedroom apartment near Main and Broadway. Every two weeks, I meet with my Supported Independent Living (SIL) worker. We talk over coffee, and she ensures that I am stable and healthy. My current living situation, on subsidy, is really good; my apartment is central, there is an abundance of local cafés and my case worker offers me support and advice and a sense of safety.

I am also very much involved in my son's life. Now 16, he is and will remain the light of my life. I'm very proud of both him and his mom, with whom I remain good friends. I haven't been hospitalized in over 13 years. Now, having finally taken that all-important first step towards an optimal quality of life, I'm not just stable and healthy: I'm thriving. ▾

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## THE HIGH STAKES OF HOUSING AFFORDABILITY— CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

The fact that very little affordable housing has been established in the past decade means that the problem is not likely to be resolved anytime soon. Is it even possible to reverse this troubling trend?

The good news is that there have been some recent positive and promising developments. Some municipalities have committed to building new or upgrading existent transitional and permanent affordable housing. Provincial and federal governments have recently committed to homelessness reduction and affordable housing strategies and are writing legislation to address those issues.

Our role as social services providers and as ordinary citizens is to keep pushing for well-rounded, inclusive and progressive policy that makes affordable housing a top priority throughout BC. We can do this by keeping ourselves informed, making connections with our local MLAs and ensuring that our voices are heard—through elections, public hearings and direct action.

I am hoping that my next 10 years in the social services field will be much different from my first 10 years. ▾

# Surviving a renoviction

Lorna Allen

In the fall of last year, the building I had lived in since moving to Canada more than five years ago was sold. This unexpected news caused a great deal of nervousness among my neighbours and me. Vancouver has an extremely low rental-vacancy rate. We had all heard about the dreaded “renoviction,” a process where tenants are forced into ending their tenancy so that the building owners can renovate suites and eventually rent them at a much higher rent, using a loophole in BC’s outdated *Residential Tenancy Act*.<sup>1</sup> We were worried that we were about to become “renovictims.”



*Lorna is a communications professional with the Canadian Mental Health Association’s BC Division. She relocated to Vancouver from Ireland a little more than five years ago. Recently, she and a neighbour were assisted by an advocate from the Vancouver Tenant’s Union to dispute an eviction notice*

Photo credit: Jennifer Quan

Lorna Allen

Our worst fears were confirmed when the new landlords immediately began to encourage us all to move out “voluntarily,” using various tactics, including pressuring us into accepting a small cash buyout, and intimidation and scaremongering. They even posted a sign in our lobby stating that “building closure permits” had already been applied for at City Hall. It turns out, no such type of permit exists. Six months later, we were all served eviction notices.

The new landlords made it sound like we had no choice in the matter, and

that being forced out of our homes was inevitable. We were told on a number of occasions that we could be accommodated in the building during the renovations, but only if we agreed to huge rent increases—in my case, this meant double the rent I was already paying—even though this contravenes the *Residential Tenancy Act*.<sup>2</sup>

As I work for a non-profit, and my salary isn’t huge, my rent is already more than one-third of my monthly income—which means that for me, my apartment already fits the definition

of unaffordable housing. In Canada, housing is considered affordable only if it costs less than 30% of a household's before-tax income.<sup>3</sup> If I had accepted the exorbitant rent increase suggested by my landlords, or if I moved to another apartment, more than half of my monthly income—if not more—would have gone towards keeping a roof over my head.

To make matters more complicated, I also have a cat. As any renter with pets knows, finding an affordable rental that welcomes pets adds another layer of stress to the prospect of house-hunting. But my cat is a member of my family. I would never consider moving somewhere that didn't accept her.

A neighbour and I reached out to the Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre (TRAC) and to our MLA's constituency office. After researching our rights, we discovered that we could dispute the eviction notice. That neighbour and I were the only tenants in our building to take our case to the Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB) for arbitration—after having watched all our friends and neighbours reluctantly move out.

After a stressful few months of waiting for our dispute hearing with the RTB, the arbitrator found that our landlords

did not require us to vacate our suites to carry out the renovations they had planned, and that the manner in which they intended to renovate—which the landlords had argued required us to end our tenancies—was a matter of convenience for the landlords rather than necessity. With proper planning on their part, ending our tenancies would not have been necessary. The eviction notices were set aside. We were so relieved.

Our elation was shattered when, less than two weeks after the arbitrator had filed his decision, three men turned up at our building to serve us a second eviction notice—citing exactly the same reasons that had already been heard at our dispute hearing! Although this sounds ridiculous, it is still legal for a landlord to do this—which, as you can imagine, is far more distressing for the renter than for the landlord. We had to go through the stressful process of disputing an eviction notice all over again.

We took our story to newly elected Vancouver city councillors and the media. Finally, after the landlords' shady practices had been exposed repeatedly in the media by a number of tenants in their other properties (who were also under the threat of

eviction), the landlords admitted that the renovations did not require the building to be empty of tenants. Our second eviction notices were withdrawn. We were able to end a year-long ordeal and get our lives back again, just before the 2018 winter holidays.

A day after our landlords withdrew our eviction notices, a new motion was passed by the City of Vancouver—one that will hopefully end renovations for people in buildings where there are five or more units. The motion, proposed by councillor and long-time anti-poverty activist Jean Swanson, was approved unanimously by City Council. The motion states that if tenants are willing to vacate temporarily during renovations, then their tenancies should not be ended and should continue at the same rate after the renovations.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the motion may not be compatible with the *Vancouver Charter*, and how effective it will be (if it is ever fully implemented) remains to be seen. Other municipalities (New Westminster, for example) have gone farther when it comes to protecting tenants.<sup>5,6</sup>

Overall, however, this is positive news for tenants throughout Vancouver—both financially and from the perspective of our citizens' health and well-being. There is a strong link between housing affordability and mental health. Recent international research shows that eviction increases the risk of suicide, psychological distress and depression.<sup>7,8</sup>

While my rental situation has now been resolved, this year-long fight

I isolated myself from my friends and family, as all I could think or talk about was my housing situation and my fear of becoming homeless. I was recently diagnosed with chronic anxiety, a condition I never suffered from before experiencing severe housing distress.

to remain in moderately affordable housing has had a huge impact on my life and health. Essentially, I felt like I was fighting for my survival.

Physically, I suffered significant weight loss. I was unable to eat for days on end due to nausea. I had frequent tension headaches and needed medication to help me sleep. My housing situation was the last thing on my mind at night and the first thing I thought about when I woke up in the morning. I spent many sleepless nights crunching numbers in my head and trying to figure out how I could pay my rent, cover my bills and still be able to eat on a regular basis if I had to move elsewhere. I have been struggling as it is, on my current “affordable” rent, having to skip regular dental check-ups because I couldn’t afford the 20-50% of the dental fee that is not covered by my extended benefits.

I isolated myself from my friends and family, as all I could think or talk about was my housing situation and my fear of becoming homeless. I was recently diagnosed with chronic anxiety, a condition I never suffered from before experiencing severe housing distress. I now must take time out of my day on a weekly basis to go to appointments to address and treat my anxiety issues.

I am fortunate in that my anxiety makes me detail-oriented and determined to find healthy coping mechanisms. That said, I became obsessed with the fight to stay in my home. It consumed my every waking moment. I felt a crushing sense of failure that I was struggling so hard to survive despite being professionally employed; I felt ashamed and humiliated that I had to share those

struggles with people I did not know. I also felt a great deal of guilt at not being able to support the people I love emotionally. I constantly felt exhausted.

The impact of this prolonged stress is likely something I will carry with me going forward. A UK study found that of those interviewed, 69% of those who experienced housing problems in the five years prior—such as struggling to pay the rent or being threatened with eviction—reported that it had a negative impact upon their mental health. A shocking 30% stated that they had had no previous mental health concerns.<sup>9</sup> This indicates that drawn-out periods of housing uncertainty can have long-term impacts, even once the housing problem has been resolved.

More needs to be done to address this issue at a provincial level. The *Residential Tenancy Act* desperately needs significant renovation itself if it is truly going to protect the people who really need protection in the midst of a housing crisis. Even with recent changes, the dispute process is drawn-out, arduous and stressful for tenants, and the decisions made by arbitrators are not consistent. The law is difficult to navigate and there are plenty of loopholes for landlords to take advantage of—particularly if they have deep pockets. Tenants should not have to rely on media pressure for landlords to act responsibly and ethically.

I know just how daunting and time-consuming housing uncertainty can be. While I had the opportunity and the ability to research and stand up and fight for my rights as a tenant, many people are not able to do so. Many people fear that it’s pointless trying

to fight against those with money and power, or feel overwhelmed at the prospect of the research involved in taking things to the RTB. Hopefully, in Vancouver at least, the new protections mean that things should not have to be taken that far—but as I have said, only time will tell whether or not these new protections actually have the power to do what they are intended to do.

Although the provincial government’s Rental Housing Task Force has announced recommendations to modernize and strengthen the *Residential Tenancy Act* and close some of the loopholes that currently allow landlords to exploit it,<sup>10</sup> there is still no concrete plan in place to do so.

I hope plans are put in place soon. No tenant should have to face the overwhelming stress of a renoeviction in their future. ▼

## related resource

Pet owners and landlords may wish to visit the website of Pets OK BC, at [petsok.ca](http://petsok.ca). Pets OK BC is a pet-positive initiative created by a broad coalition of citizens and nonprofit organizations from across British Columbia. The coalition’s primary goal is to strike down laws in BC that allow property owners to impose unfair “no pets” policies on tenants and strata properties.

# Not just another vehicle

## HOW CITY BYLAWS ROBBED ME OF MY HOME ON WHEELS

David Butler

“I hope this article goes to a lot of city councillors. My vehicle was being ticketed but I was saying, ‘I’m not making a mess and I’m not asking for help. Just leave me alone.’ ‘Oh, we’ll help you with housing,’ they said. But I didn’t want help. I already had my housing.

*David moved to Vancouver a few years ago from Manitoba. He works in the Downtown Eastside and is passionate about lobbying the local government to support alternative options for housing in one of the country’s most expensive cities*

*Based on an interview with David by Sarah Hamid-Balma. David’s story was aired by the CBC in June 2018. The CBC news clip can be viewed at [youtu.be/ZzpP\\_5RiU78](https://youtu.be/ZzpP_5RiU78)*



David Butler

“I came to Vancouver from Manitoba in 2010 or 2011. I lived in Calgary from 2005 to 2009, on the streets and in shelters. I left Calgary in 2009, went back to Manitoba for a bit, then I came out here. The first place I stayed [in Vancouver] was the First United Church.

“I wanted to give back to the community. That’s what we’re supposed to do, we’re supposed to give back to some

people that helped us. I was staying at a few of the shelters here: Union Gospel Mission, First United, Harbour Light, The Beacon, The Haven. I volunteered while I was staying at these places. I volunteered at First United for a year. Then I switched to Powell Street Getaway.

“I like the work here at Powell Street Getaway. I like working with people. I do general maintenance and janitorial,

fix the toilet, the shower, take the garbage out. I've worked all my life. I lived off the farm—we had a section of land back in Manitoba.

"I have two sisters. We keep in touch by Facebook. We had a brother but he died [in a car accident]. The guy who was driving had been caught 13 times for impaired driving and on his fourteenth time, he killed my brother.

"My dad passed away in 2011 and my mom passed away in 2013. When the estate settled, I went straight to a dealership. I had already planned it out. I was going to buy a motorhome, that way I didn't have to rely on the city, I didn't have to rely on anyone other than services for food. I just thought why would I pay \$600, \$700, \$800 a month when I could pay \$1800 for a year [for car insurance] and have a home—and a car?

"Sometimes I hear, 'Oh, but you're not paying taxes.' Oh yes, I am. I pay taxes every time I insure my vehicle, so don't tell me that I don't pay taxes for my home. In my mind, the fact that my vehicle is my home makes what the city did to me worse, illegal.

"It was a big 28-foot motorhome, a 1994 model but in really good shape. It had a master bedroom in the back—that was full-size, not a flip down. It had a shower, a kitchen, sink, fridge, microwave, stove. I had my own generator that I bought. Just after I got the motorhome, I actually took it to Frank Slide for a trip—that's through the Crowsnest Pass, before Lethbridge [Alberta]. It was a good trip. I thought it was going to be really expensive driving it but it didn't actually cost me a whole lot.

"Throughout the whole first year I got up to 17 parking tickets, the first one pretty much right away. I didn't even park in the same spot. I kept moving. I've had people tell me I was targeted. I say that because I see motorhomes parked round here now and I don't see one of them being bothered—though that was since my experience.

"I was surprised to see the parking tickets, but I also didn't look at the city bylaws. I've been told since then that the bylaws haven't changed in a million years: you can't park anything over 21 feet on city streets. You used to be able to park in the Walmart parking lot, but that's changed, from what I've been told. You can't park overnight anymore, only three or four hours.

"In my opinion, the person or group that thought they could end homelessness ... you can't. There are some people that never want to be housed. I know that from Calgary. There are some people on the streets, they don't like housing, they don't want to be housed. You can't end it. All this money to end homelessness when you can't for some people.

"All the talk about microhomes and tiny homes really gets me, too. There was the story that came out about

this guy and his wife who built this little house, it looked like a log house on a trailer, but the city said they couldn't live in it because it was too small. What the f\*&?! So you can't live in that, but you can live over here in these modules—and they're smaller than that! My motorhome was bigger, and you're telling me I can't live in my motorhome?

"For me, my ideal home has to have wheels. I want to be able to go where I want to go. I don't want to have to rely on someone else. I was happy when I lived in my motorhome for that whole year and seven months before I got towed. One night that I got a parking ticket, I actually happened to be in the motorhome—thinking back, I wish I had recorded the conversation with the parking authority.

"I come from Manitoba, where any parking tickets that you incur go against your insurance on your vehicle. You can't reinsure your vehicle if you haven't paid your parking tickets. Here, parking tickets don't have anything to do with your insurance. So I could have re-insured my vehicle, but I didn't know I could. I even had the money to insure it. So all that time it was uninsured, when I moved it I had to be very careful. I did not want to have an

For me, my ideal home has to have wheels. I want to be able to go where I want to go. I don't want to have to rely on someone else. I was happy when I lived in my motorhome for that whole year and seven months before I got towed.



David Butler

They refurbished the building to put more people in there. Take a small room and cut it in half and that’s how big the rooms are there. Take someone with claustrophobia and put them in a room like that and what do you think is going to happen to them? If they’re not mental before, they will be shortly after.

accident. If I did, I would have just said, ‘Take me to jail.’

‘I’m hoping that bylaws will change. I’m hoping they will eventually take an empty lot, a trailer park down here. I would like to see a lot, like a campsite, but where we could park our motorhomes—with rules like keeping your site clean.

‘[Anti-poverty activist] Jean Swanson’s on city council now, so I’m hoping

we can get a place where we can park our motorhomes. I’m okay with a fee to park. I might be able to afford \$600 once I start working full-time but not that many people could afford that. My motorhome also let me be close to my work. I could walk or bus home.

‘There’s definitely enough people to fill a motorhome park. There used to be a lot [of motorhomes] over by Strathcona Park but they’ve towed many of them, making more people homeless. They’ve

got to stop making more people homeless. Take the Hazelwood Hotel on Hastings. They refurbished the building to put more people in there. Take a small room and cut it in half and that’s how big the rooms are there. Take someone with claustrophobia and put them in a room like that and what do you think is going to happen to them? If they’re not mental before, they will be shortly after.

‘It’s like these modules over here—the rooms are so small—although at least those ones have a little kitchenette and washer/dryer. But you walk in the door and there’s basically just room to turn around in. And you want to stick me in that? No way. It feels like jail.

‘I got word today that I move into a residence tomorrow, but I don’t really want to. I want my motorhome back. But right now, I’ll take the residence. It’s in Tamara House, which is an SRO [single-room occupancy]. They tell me it’s the biggest room there. It gives me a base to continue to fight to get my motorhome back. I’m going to make the best of it and keep moving ahead.

‘The last city council’s vision would make living down here [in the Downtown Eastside] unaffordable. The only people that would be here would be the people with money, lots of it. They don’t give a s\*\*t about the homeless down here. I shouldn’t say that; there are groups that do. But a while ago, I came across a PDF file about the Downtown Eastside and the ideas about what they were going to do down here. They’re doing what they think is in the best interest [of the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

# Trusting the unknown

## FROM DOMESTIC ABUSE TO A HOME OF SECURITY, STRENGTH AND A NEW BEGINNING

Holly\*

*“If you limit your choice only to what seems possible or reasonable, you disconnect yourself from what you truly want, and all that is left is compromise” – Robert Fritz*



*Holly is a beautiful mama of two children. She is passionate about conscious parenting and holistic medicine, an advocate for mental health and a lover of connection. Holly is a nature lover who enjoys spending time practising yoga and has a deep love for boxing and kickboxing*

*\*pseudonym*

When a marriage breaks down, the emotional upheaval is compounded by practical everyday concerns that suddenly require wholesale rethinking. One of those practical concerns is housing: Where do I go? How do I put a roof over my children's heads? How can I make sure we sleep warm and safe at night?

I knew from the very beginning that our marriage would crumble in time, yet I chose to look past his brokenness and love him unconditionally, even

through the abuse. Over time that wasn't good enough. Our relationship was built on a sand foundation, not a rock-solid one.

This story is not about the abused victim I once was, but about the courageous soul that chose to jump into the unknown and create a new life for herself and her children. Thankfully, the stars aligned. Sometimes it's about being in the right place at the right time, and that is what happened for me.

Given the circumstances, I knew it was far healthier for us to live in a home free from abuse—one that I could afford on my own—a place where my kids and I could feel safe and secure and grow as a family.

It took some time to work up the courage to leave. In fact, I had begun researching my options long before I actually had enough strength to make the decision. I was even offered a co-op housing placement a year before my son (our second child) was born, but I turned down the opportunity because I was too scared to make the commitment.

But over time, the marriage worsened, and the emotional and mental abuse I received from my narcissistic husband ate away at me. I knew I had to end our relationship in order to rebuild my self-confidence and start living a life of self-love and self-worth. Most importantly, I needed to show my children (at the time aged 4 years and 10 months) that their mother is a strong human being, and that any form of abuse is not okay, whether it's physical, mental or emotional. I wasn't going to let them continue to witness the nightmare that was my marriage as they grew up.

He wasn't physically abusive, but sometimes I wonder if that would have been more straightforward. Our society has a roadmap for dealing with physical hurts—we have medications for pain and our bodies heal over time. But the path for healing from

emotional and mental abuse by a loved one isn't as clear. I was constantly put down, criticized, gaslit, body-shamed, manipulated and told I was stupid. Even today, four years down the road, those wounds continue to heal. I have difficulty just writing this article, but I know it's for the greater good.

I discreetly started doing more research—not just about housing options but also about everything that needs to be in place when you are considering leaving a partner. Then I applied for co-ops and BC Housing all over my community, praying that something would come up fast.

I'd always felt comfortable with the idea of supportive and cooperative housing alternatives because that's how I grew up. As a single parent, my mother had to rely on BC Housing (low-income housing) to raise me. Low-income housing was what I knew.

Of course, I would have liked my kids to grow up in the home they were born in. As a young mother, I had the luxury of living in a beautiful house that my husband had purchased before he met me. Did I question whether I would be able to give my children all they needed as a single mother? Yes, on a daily basis, and I still

do to this day. Like all children, my children deserve to grow and develop in a home that is nurturing, loving and safe. Given the circumstances, I knew it was far healthier for us to live in a home free from abuse—one that I could afford on my own—a place where my kids and I could feel safe and secure and grow as a family.

My greatest concern about being a single mother was being able to survive financially. I had a good position in my company, and the company supported me 100%, but I still had that fear. After all, I wasn't just taking care of myself; I was taking care of my children, and they are my number-one priority. I worried about being able to provide them with food, shelter, clothes, daycare, education—the list goes on, and the very little child support I received didn't go very far. I live in Richmond, in the Greater Vancouver area, one of the most expensive places to live in the country; I knew my living costs would only go up when I moved out on my own.

Particularly because I knew our family would be a single-parent family, I put great pressure on myself to be the best mom I could, all the time. I truly had to let some of that go because I can't be their everything. It's not a realistic goal, and it wasn't good for my mental health to put that pressure on myself, to always strive for that kind of perfection. No one is perfect; if we are constantly striving for perfection, then all that means is that nothing we do is ever good enough. Striving for perfection kills our soul.

One of the greatest lessons I learned in the process of finding a safe home as a single parent was how to receive

help, which is never easy. I've always seen myself as a "warrior mama": a mother who can do anything on her own, no matter how challenging it might seem. I am still a warrior at heart, it's in my blood. But it also makes it difficult to accept help, even when I really need it.

You know that saying, "It takes a village to raise a child"? Well, I found out quickly—being out on my own and raising my kids pretty much full-time—that it does take a village to raise these little humans. If I could give any words of advice to other single parents searching for a home to raise their kids—besides being kind and gentle to yourself—it's this: let go of your ego and be open to asking for—and receiving—help. Your support system is your lifeline, whether it is your family, your friends, your doctor, a therapist, a mentor, a coach, whoever. Allow them to work with you because you are worth it.

Getting into cooperative housing has been such a blessing. I've always told others that a vacancy came at exactly the right time. When my youngest child was about 10 months old, I was offered a unit in a co-op housing community. I knew I had to accept the offer this time. If I didn't, I would be trapped in my abusive marriage, in a constant state of feeling unworthy and worthless. I feared that vicious cycle would continue on through my kids' lives and into the generations to come.

That was the deciding factor: Despite all the fears in my head, my heart was telling me, No more! Trusting your heart is a huge part of the process—

that, and trusting that things will work out, despite all the unknowns.

So, I handed over the deposit and my first rent cheque for our three-bedroom townhome and made the move.

Thankfully, the housing cooperative we found is in Richmond, so we got to stay in a familiar environment. A huge part of jumping into a new and scary situation is having community and resources to support you—especially when you are dealing with mental health issues or domestic abuse. My mom, my sister and all my beautiful friends are in Richmond, and my job is here.

I really wanted the transition for my kids to be as smooth as it could be. With any decision I made, I had to make sure it wasn't going to be too much for them—especially for my daughter, the eldest. Leaving our home community wasn't an option for us. We could have created a new life in another city, but my kids needed access to their dad, who is also in Richmond. We are also very much rooted in the wonderful community at my children's school. It comforts me to know that I can reach my kids easily at school if there is ever an emergency and that they have the support of their friends and the school administration.



Photo credit: PeopleImages at ©iStockphoto.com

If I could give any words of advice to other single parents searching for a home to raise their kids—besides being kind and gentle to yourself—it's this: let go of your ego and be open to asking for—and receiving—help.

Coming to terms with my abusive marriage and finding the self-compassion and strength to leave—and then rebuilding my life—has taken a tremendous toll on my mental health. But facing my health challenges, and learning how to best address them, has been empowering. When I accepted that I struggle with depression, I didn't simply label my mental illness. I actually gave myself a new superpower to help support others and myself on our journey to well-being. It's been healing, to say the least.

Leaving an abuser is a life-changing event. You need to have a safe home and a safe and supportive community around you to do it successfully. And above all, you need to not be afraid to ask for help. Looking back, I'm grateful that I honoured the process by making sure to get the right support—from my community, my family, my friends and my medical practitioners. That support is what truly has saved my life.

My hope is that reading my story will help others in the same position to find the courage to make a change. In the deepest and darkest times in your life, surround yourself with people who will love and support you. Be brave. Be courageous. Be hopeful. You are absolutely worth it.

If you are in any doubt about how rethinking your housing situation might be a path forward to a new life, think of my story. BC Housing has given my family and me the chance to

begin a journey of freedom, healing and self-love. That's all I could ever ask for.

On the desk in his office, my psychologist has a coffee mug that says on its side, "Face s\*\*t." It always makes me laugh. I have realized that that it is the best approach in life, including healing the trauma of our past in order to live life freely.

Rethink your housing. Face your s\*\*t. Embrace life. ▼

## UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION

An online training program supporting those who work directly or indirectly with people experiencing addiction. Gain confidence and skills for responding in a positive and respectful way.

[UnderstandingAddiction.ca](http://UnderstandingAddiction.ca)  
Register by May 24  
\$150 per person



Canadian Mental Health Association  
British Columbia  
Mental health for all

## NOT JUST ANOTHER VEHICLE—CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18

city]. They haven't really come to talk to us. Sometimes what's in the best interest of the people who live here is not in politicians' best interest.

"The night they took my motorhome, I ended up sleeping underneath the Skytrain station at Terminal and Main on the cement. I walked home that night after work, looking around, and was like, 'My motorhome's gone!'

"I turned around and walked back up the street. I didn't know what to

think. All of my personal belongings were in the motorhome. I had all my clothing, generators—I'm hoping it's still in the impound. When I got in touch with TV and Tina, a journalist, she got in touch with the city on my behalf and they [the city] told me I owe them \$6000 in towing costs, impound costs, ticket costs, fuel costs. I'm supposed to contact a lawyer that Tina found for me, but I've just been so depressed. If it wasn't for my workplace ... The staff are really supportive. I don't have any close

friends, but we're all kind of in the same boat here.

"I hope I have Wi-Fi at my new place because I have a bunch of computers [in my motorhome] I'd like to get back up and running. I used to build computers. I like to teach people how to use computers. There are a lot of people here that are computer illiterate and I could give something back to the community." ▼

# Precipitating factors

## A CASE MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE ON HOMELESSNESS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SECURE HOUSING

Dale Wallace

There is little doubt that having a home makes it easier for a person to manage their life; there is equally little doubt that not having a home makes for a dangerous existence.



*Dale has been a psychiatric nurse for 40 years, in the areas of acute psychiatry, geriatrics, forensics and psychiatric emergency. Currently, he works in a Lower Mainland community mental health clinic. Dale also taught high-school English for 25 years. During that period, he taught full-time and worked part-time as a nurse*

*\*pseudonym*

Dale Wallace

I am a psychiatric nurse and case manager at a mental health clinic in the Lower Mainland. Four of the clinic's clients have died in recent years because they had inadequate housing—or no housing at all.

One of my clients, Norman,\* had to leave his room-and-board situation because his landlord was selling the house. The landlord had told Norman and me several months in advance that the house was going to be sold. But soon after he received his notice, Norman told the landlord he was leaving and walked out, with only the clothes on his back. He had been

homeless in the past, so it was somewhat logical that he would not be afraid to be homeless again. Norman didn't call me, and there was no way for me to reach him. After a period of time, as is standard in most clinics, he was formally deemed "lost to contact" and discharged from our program.

Several months later, I received a report from the police that Norman was staying mostly on a park bench on a beach in White Rock. At that time, the police offered to help him obtain services from a mental health clinic, but he declined. A few weeks later, Norman's body washed ashore

Many other cities in Canada are also slowly realizing that connecting each homeless person with a case manager is an important part of the puzzle. When that happens, the homeless person becomes a client, not just someone on the street.

on the beach. The cause of death was undetermined, but it is difficult to argue that being homeless wasn't a precipitating factor.

Les,\* another former client, was connected to our clinic for about two months. Although he had been referred to us by another medical professional, after an assessment by our mental health team, we determined that he did not have a mental illness. He was referred back to Home and Community Care, which provides health services to support individuals so they can manage their health conditions at home. Les was living in a small holiday trailer in a trailer park and had been neglecting his physical health; living in the trailer during the winter months exacerbated his health challenges. Eventually, Les developed a serious bladder infection, which became septic and caused his death. It was obvious to everyone involved that inadequate housing had been a contributing factor.

Walter\* came to the clinic while he was homeless. I was searching for housing for him when he suddenly discharged himself from services, saying he had a place to live with friends. That winter, Walter was found dead in an old, abandoned camper in a secluded area. It was especially traumatic for

all involved because his body was not discovered until about two weeks after his death. Again, the fact that Walter was homeless and had no heat or running water in the camper was likely a factor in his death.

My fourth client, Sonya,\* was also homeless, but she found space in a shelter in Surrey. Sonya had a substance use disorder that had been in remission for a long period of time. Although she had used heroin as a young person, she had not used any other drug, except alcohol, for many years. Unfortunately, there was considerable illicit drug use happening around the shelter. Being in a shelter with so many drugs easily accessible proved to be too much for her, and within a week of being in the shelter, Sonya died from a fentanyl overdose. Her relapse caused her death, but if she had not been homeless—had not had to go to a shelter—there is a very good chance that Sonya would not have relapsed and would still be alive today.

Obviously, solutions to homelessness need to be found. Yet repeating the old mantra of “we need more affordable housing” is not adequate. Homelessness is a complicated problem, and it might never be eradicated completely, but the solution requires many people

and agencies working together to implement coordinated plans. Perhaps it is time to use bold actions to address this insidious problem.

Before moving to British Columbia, I lived and worked in Calgary for 38 years. My colleagues and I frequently discussed the approach to homelessness taken by the small city of Medicine Hat, Alberta. Medicine Hat's first step was to define what it means to be homeless. In Medicine Hat, someone stops being homeless if they express the desire to get off the streets. The city's commitment is that within three days of someone making their desire known to the local housing society, they will be seen by a support worker, and within 10 days they should be housed permanently because of the city's commitment to ‘housing first.’ This redefinition of what it means to be homeless was a bold move, and it helped to revolutionize how people in Medicine Hat viewed the housing problem. Up until that point, most people had understood “being homeless” to be (literally or metaphorically) living under the bridge. The redefinition placed the focus on the active solution—the securing of a place to live—rather than on the fact of an individual's insecure housing situation.

Another aspect of Medicine Hat's new definition of “homelessness” is that homelessness is now viewed as a temporary state, not a character flaw. In other words, even if a person is living on the streets at the moment, as long as they have a connection to a professional and a desire to get off the streets, they are not considered homeless.

Many other cities in Canada are also slowly realizing that connecting

each homeless person with a case manager is an important part of the puzzle. When that happens, the homeless person becomes a client, not just someone on the street. The case manager is able to help the client connect with resources, see physicians for physical health issues, get treatment for addictions and mental health conditions, start on the journey to secure appropriate housing and get the other necessities of life—which frequently includes simply having enough to eat on a daily basis.

Left on their own, people who are homeless tend to come together for companionship and support. However, in some cases, the relationships they develop in these circumstances may not be healthy or safe. They may use drugs together, commit crimes together, live in makeshift tents together—they may support each other in dangerous situations. Sadly, all too often, when people who are homeless live together, they die together. While the support they can offer each other is well intentioned, it is not always life-saving. News reports often detail deaths that occur in tent cities where people without secure housing have congregated.<sup>1</sup>

A recent study done by *Megaphone Magazine*, which assists people who are homeless by giving them opportunities to work, found that people without a home experience a dramatic reduction in life expectancy—the average lifespan of someone who is homeless in British Columbia is about 40-47 years, while the average British Columbian's is 82.65 years. *Megaphone's* research methods have been criticized, but the fact is that if you are homeless, you are more likely

to die an earlier death than if you are housed, no matter how much support you get from other people.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from the Medicine Hat example, the *Megaphone* research and my own observations and experience that a relationship with a case manager exponentially improves the chances that a person who is homeless will get off the streets and eventually thrive, even if they are coping with illness. In my four years as a case manager at a community mental health clinic, my active clients are rarely homeless; however, I have had to work hard to prevent some of my clients from becoming homeless. For several of them, I have been able to help obtain a Supported Independent Living (SIL) subsidy so they can

afford to live in their apartment and not be evicted. Simply helping a client find other accommodation when they have to leave their housing situation helps keep them off the street and is extremely important to their overall mental and physical health.

Thinking that the only solution to homelessness is to build more affordable housing is short-sighted. It's difficult for human beings to make large changes in their lives without help. If someone wants off the street, they need someone who has the knowledge and resources to help them. That's why case managers and other caring, knowledgeable individuals are such an important part of the equation. The *housing* problem requires a *human* solution. ▾



**visions**

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The next issue we will be soliciting articles for is about **managing relapse and setbacks**.

If you have a story about relapse prevention or management (individual, family member or service provider), please contact us at [visions@heretohelp.bc.ca](mailto:visions@heretohelp.bc.ca) by June 15, 2019.

# Everyone has a little architect in them

## CO-FOUNDER TALKS ABOUT LIFE IN VANCOUVER'S FIRST COHOUSING COMMUNITY

Ericka Stephens-Rennie

It's 5:30 on a Monday evening and I'm playing Lego-Hot Wheels with my kids at home, building tiny, four-wheeled vehicles and using the Hot Wheels launchers to see how far and fast we can make the Lego cars go, and whether they survive the trip. It's a game my five-year-old invented, and while he gently coaches me and his two-year-old brother on how to construct our vehicles for maximum speed and total destruction, he tells us stories about his day.

*Ericka is a co-founder, community member and resident of Vancouver's first cohousing community. She's a policy analyst passionate about trying new things and finding innovative solutions for complex problems. A Jane-of-all-trades, she prides herself on learning something new everywhere she goes. Ericka is a wife and a mama to two little humans in Vancouver, BC*



Photo credit: Andrew Stephens-Rennie

The author's child looks out over the courtyard from their private balcony

While his hands are occupied, I'm focused on him and his brother. He tells me about the book at circle time, who he played with at recess, why his socks got wet and a play he's imagined and that he is recruiting his classmates to act in. My littlest one happily interjects with his own comments and questions, in between finding all the Lego pieces that are now spread across the living room floor. It's good to reconnect at the end of our day, and I'm aware that I'm privileged to have these focused family hours because of where I live. Mondays are common

meal nights in our cohousing community: a team of three people will cook for about 40 community members, including us. When it's not our turn to cook, all we have to do is show up.

Regular common meals are one of the rhythms of life in a cohousing community. A cohousing community is a type of housing that is financed and designed by the first residents who live there, and that sets aside a large amount of space as common amenity area, which we call our common house. Cohousing neighbours live together

following a few guiding principles that create a common lifestyle. In our cohousing community, we make certain decisions by consensus, we take part in cooking and cleaning up after common meals once every five weeks, and we do some committee work to support the work of our strata and community.

Before we were residents, the founding members of the community formed a development company together. To pay for the project, we pooled the money that would become our down payments and used it to purchase the land, and to pay various tradespeople. We worked with an architect to determine everything about the buildings and open space. We made choices about what rooms would be included in our 6000-square-foot common house. We also had the architect design each of the 31 private homes. At the moment of closing on our future homes, our investments in the development company became our down payment.

One of our architects, Charles Durrett, used to say, “Everyone has a little architect in them.” Turns out, when you empower people to make design choices about their living space, they have really clear ideas about living space. For instance, most of our two-bedroom homes have just one bathroom—rather than the conventional two-bedroom, two-bathroom layout.

When given the choice between more living space, more storage or an extra bathroom, most people chose the living space. And when you live in a community with 31 private homes and a common house, there are plenty of other bathrooms in an emergency. When there’s a line-up for the bathroom in our house, the kids choose to knock on

a friend’s door, or the door of a nearby neighbour. Sometimes such trips to the bathroom result in our kids bringing home a baked treat, a friend or a dinner invitation—and the kids are almost always gone longer than it takes to pee. We call this “being cohoused”—when you’re waylaid by helpful neighbours or entertaining conversations—and it happens a lot around here.

Our design, like most cohousing communities, maximizes human interaction with simple tweaks to what you might see in a standard multi-family housing complex. Instead of facing away from each other, our front doors open onto a common courtyard. Kitchen windows overlook common areas, frequently with the sink at the window—most of us want to be interrupted when we’re doing dishes! As our mail delivery person says, “This place looks like it was designed by real humans.”

Indeed.

Our common house is an extension of our private homes. My private home has two bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen, living room and dining room. I could never afford a huge kids’ play room, a big shared office, a craft room, multiple guest rooms or a wood workshop—but I have access to all this in our common house, in addition to a big kitchen, dining room and multipurpose room.

I work from home, frequently in the shared office space in the common house. My husband and I do weekly yoga and fitness classes with neighbours in the multipurpose room. When we host birthday or Christmas parties, we do it in the common house,

## related resource

You can find more details on cohousing at [cohousing.ca](http://cohousing.ca) and [www.cohousing.org](http://www.cohousing.org) or in the book *Creating Cohousing* by Charles Durrett and Katie McCamant (New Society Publishers, 2011).

where we don’t have the space limits of our 850-square-foot, open-concept home. Our kids play in the common house playroom, which is outfitted with mattresses, pillows, a swing and hanging rings. They spend time there on rainy days, in the early morning and right before and after dinner.

We can share parenting and child care with neighbours. As a result, my husband and I have more date nights, more opportunities for quiet time together and more time for ourselves.

In the current Vancouver real-estate market, if we were to buy on our own, all we could ever afford is a two-bedroom condo. That housing option would have given us privacy, but we wouldn’t have been able to afford much else. Living in a cohousing community, on the other hand, allows us to choose how much privacy we want and how much public life we want. And each member of our family gets to make this choice for themselves. My husband, an introvert, frequently chooses to use the back stairs or attend only small-group gatherings. I often choose larger gatherings and go places where I am more likely to meet people.

Of course, there is sometimes conflict among neighbours, as there always is when people live together. We host



Photo credit: Wendy D Photography

(Left) Neighbours Gary Birch and Taryn Griffiths talk with former Mayor Gregor Robertson about the importance of building homes to promote neighbourliness and community; (right) neighbours and guests talk and share parenting in the courtyard before a weeknight common meal

Our design, like most cohousing communities, maximizes human interaction with simple tweaks. Instead of facing away from each other, our front doors open onto a common courtyard.

an annual community workshop on conflict resolution to build a shared framework of how to resolve conflict. The common house also facilitates regular positive interactions with most neighbours, and I find the frequency of these interactions makes it hard to stay in conflict with any one individual for long. That isn't to say that all my neighbours are my best friends. On the contrary, many of them are simply neighbours—people I'm friendly with, from whom I'd borrow a cup of sugar or whose dog I'd walk in a pinch.

We are aware that this kind of “neighbour-intensive” housing is not

for everyone. We stumbled upon the idea of cohousing while endlessly searching for two- and three-bedroom condos that were centrally located and in our price range. While we didn't find one of those condos, we did stumble on an article about Quayside Cohousing<sup>1</sup> in North Vancouver and became curious about the idea of this kind of collaborative housing (a general term that includes a range of intentional communities). We'd lived in cooperative housing, a form of lower-cost, community-oriented rental housing, in Ottawa and Vancouver. We'd even considered collective houses before—where more than one family resides under one roof—but we found

that to be too much community and not enough private space. Could cohousing be the answer?

For us—six years and a few hiccups later, the efforts of more than 40 adults and our success building a 31-unit, multi-million-dollar housing project—the answer to that question is a resounding yes. ▼

# The Branch

## PILOTING INNOVATIVE, SAFE, SUPPORTED, TEMPORARY BRIDGE-TO-HOUSING IN KAMLOOPS

Natika Bock

The Branch, a unique temporary housing project in Kamloops, BC, provides a bridge-to-housing opportunity for community members who are waiting for the construction of two supported housing complexes, one of which is complete and the other slated for completion in the fall of 2019.



Photo credit: Natika Bock

Jennifer Cottell, Rachel Gaunce and Sarah McCallum. Rachel is a resident and very proud to call The Branch home. Rachel identifies as a transgender individual

*Natika is the Supportive Housing Manager at The Branch, Canadian Mental Health Association – Kamloops. She is Co-chair of the HomeFree Housing & Supports Committee, a previous member of the provincial Advisory Forum on Poverty Reduction and the mom of a young, spirited daughter—a proud Huu-ay-aht Citizen and advocate in training*

*This article was written on the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc Territory within the unceded traditional lands of the Secwepemc Nation*

The Branch accommodates 36 adult residents, is pet-friendly and is open to all genders and sexual orientations. It is a culturally safe space for urban Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) and members of the LGBTQ2S+ community. The Branch is also a registered overdose prevention site with an injection room where residents can use intravenously with clean supplies, in private and without stigma. The intention of The Branch is to provide a smooth transition for folks out of homelessness while they await the new, permanent modular housing developments. Once that transition has been made, The Branch will close.

The word “branch” has many meanings, some of which are reflected in the philosophy of The Branch environment. Just like a branch on a tree, The Branch is supported by a sturdy core—a trunk—that derives its strength from the passion of the people who participate in the program, sharing their experiences and perspectives. And just like the branch of a tree draws its nourishment from its roots, much of the strength of our residents and The Branch’s environment and programs is rooted in our respect for our diverse traditional, social and cultural roots. The metaphor of the branch also reflects our affection for our

## bridge to permanent housing

The Kamloops modular housing projects are supportive, affordable housing units funded by BC Housing and operated by various housing providers, including ASK Wellness Society and the Canadian Mental Health Association. The rent is \$375 per month, including two meals a day and on-site support.

neighbourhood, as many of the streets in our catchment are named after trees.

Ultimately, just like the branch of a tree is part of something larger than itself, The Branch is certainly part of something larger: it is a unique bridge-to-housing program that helps close a subtle but important gap in services related to our local affordable housing continuum. The Branch is where folks exiting homelessness settle into a warm, safe space until permanent modular units are built and ready for occupancy.

### Part of something larger

In Kamloops, Emerald Centre (also operated by the Canadian Mental Health Association) is available for folks who are homeless on a first-come, first-serve basis. There is a bed-check at 9:30 p.m., and if someone isn't there, the bed is given to the next person.

Emerald Centre is the first point of contact for folks who are exiting homelessness. There, they are assigned a case manager and complete the vulnerability assessment tool, a questionnaire to assess their risk for homelessness, among other things. The average stay for folks at the shelter is 10 days; if they meet the criteria for supportive housing, they are triaged to The Branch.

The aim of The Branch is to support life skills focused on housing retention,

including management of personal items, care of personal space and autonomy. As well, folks are connected to income assistance and have damage deposits so that they are set up for success when they move into permanent housing.

The Branch program includes other innovations as well. Our staffing model includes dedicated and talented Canadian Mental Health Association supportive 24-hour housing staff and voluntary services from community partners. There are two dedicated spaces for Interior Health street nurses and other professional teams, including the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team, Community Living BC, mental health and substance use clinicians, the SHOP Program (Social and Health Options for Persons in Sex Work) and street outreach from ASK Wellness Society. Two local restaurants have stepped up to provide food services for residents, and these eateries are our next-door neighbours.

These important connections speak to our commitment to nurture community pride and safety, and support the local economy. We are good neighbours and The Branch is an outstanding example of a neighbourhood coming together to meet our specific needs.

### Assessing eligibility

To be eligible for The Branch and prioritized for permanent housing, all applicants must complete the BC Housing vulnerability assessment tool (VAT). Once a month, local housing representatives come together as a coordinated access team to determine where folks should be housed based on their VAT score and the level of supports available.

The VAT was developed by the Downtown Emergency Service Center in Seattle, Washington. A Canadian version was developed by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness in 2016. BC Housing uses the VAT as a tool to determine housing services eligibility for adults experiencing homelessness.

The VAT assesses 10 domains, including an individual's survival skills, health and medical risks, communication skills and orientation and organization capacities. Together, these individual domain scores give service providers an idea of how to best support an individual and better determine how to provide the most focused support for each person.

### Creating responsive communities

In response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, our "reconcilACTION" at The Branch is to ensure that the now well-documented over-representation of Indigenous peoples in precarious housing situations is reflected accurately in national homeless statistics.

Our coordinated access team purposefully designated 40% of The Branch to house Indigenous residents. During the

staff orientation process, all Branch staff members are given Jesse Thistle's excellent *Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada*<sup>1</sup> as part of their cultural safety and competency training package. As a non-Indigenous housing provider, The Branch is wholly dedicated to acknowledging and practising appropriate traditional protocols to honour the people we serve and the land on which we do our good work.

The ultimate goal of The Branch is to create a living space where folks have a sense of belonging. Creating a home environment where folks see the best of themselves reflected by others and

the community—where they can relax, stabilize, get well and take advantage of services readily accessible to them—takes courage, creativity, innovation and inclusion. Without prompting, residents formed an advisory committee that regularly brings ideas and concerns to Branch staff. Staff members facilitate and record these regular meetings, listening openly and closely in order to implement new directions in policy and process.

For example, in response to the advisory committee's recommendation, we implemented a safe smoking area on-site for folks who use illicit

substances by smoking. This transparency, coupled with the implementation of safety measure to address the change in policy, has been remarkably successful. We've had only two medical emergencies, and because of our change in practice, these emergencies received quick, caring response and had successful outcomes.

The residents are not only our main stakeholders; they are the undisputed experts. As we say often at The Branch and in all social services sectors, "Nothing about us without us."

A true revolution in our housing situation will start only with a shift in culture. Current conversations about homelessness need to move away from the popular myth of folks as lazy and unmotivated and towards a narrative that includes room for a discussion of childhood trauma and other forms of abuse common in the population that is currently homeless or at risk for homelessness.<sup>2</sup> "To house or not to house" is not a debate: it is a wholly unethical question. Housing is a human right. As a society, we need to ensure that everyone has the capacity and the ability to exercise that right.

The symbol of the branch is significant in other ways as well. We often think of a branch as a peace offering or as a lifeline. The Branch is both of these, helping to respond to the housing crisis by extending a lifeline to those who need it, and demonstrating—along with its partners—peaceful, innovative solutions to homelessness.

For more information on The Branch and its programs, please visit our website: [kamloops.cmha.bc.ca](http://kamloops.cmha.bc.ca). ▽



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## closing tent cities during an overdose crisis might be dangerous

*Marilou Gagnon, RN, PhD*

*Marilou is an associate professor at the University of Victoria school of nursing, president of the Harm Reduction Nurses Association, and an organizer with Camp Namegans. Reprinted with permission from the Georgia Straight, September 10, 2018*

On Friday [September 7, 2018], BC Supreme Court Justice Ward Branch granted a temporary injunction as well as an enforcement order to force the closing of a Saanich tent city (known as Camp Namegans) in Regina Park and the displacement of more than 100 homeless people with nowhere to go.

Over the past four months, Camp Namegans has been providing a sanctuary to people who are in desperate need of housing in Greater Victoria. I became involved with Camp Namegans when I moved to BC in June. As a nurse and researcher who focuses on harm reduction, social justice, and access to care for marginalized communities, it was a natural fit.

Prior to living in Saanich, I had been involved in running an overdose-prevention site in Ottawa and advocating for nurses at the front-line of the overdose crisis in BC. Exposed to realities of the overdose crisis and dominant media discourse about tent cities, I came to Camp Namegans ready to intervene. I expected chaos. I expected meetings to be interrupted by residents screaming, “Help! overdose!” I expected sirens, first responders, paramedics. I expected loss and grief.

None of that happened.

Over time, I have been witness to the positive impacts of the camp on the residents. Every day, they are less stressed, happier, and healthier; they are actively participating in meetings and camp activities; they are accessing services more easily; and they are building a sense of community and working together to look after themselves, one another, and their homes.

As autonomous spaces, tent cities allow homeless people to exercise self-determination over their homes and their lives. In turn, this improves their general health and well-being. This stands in stark contrast to institutionalized spaces like shelters and supportive

housing, which leave very little room for homeless people to make decisions about their lives and connect with each other.

On average, 100 people are dying of an overdose in BC every month, four people every day. Last year alone [2017], there were more than 1,400 overdose deaths in this province. Something was definitely working at Camp Namegans, because in the course of four months, there has been no overdose deaths and only a few overdoses, all reversed by camp residents.

Tent cities can be very effective at preventing overdoses and overdose deaths. They give residents a home, including a sense of community, safety, and belonging, which, in turn, decreases isolation, the stress of homelessness, and the need to use drugs. They increase access to harm-reduction services, harm-reduction supplies, naloxone, and naloxone training. They create a safer space for residents who use drugs near someone who can intervene in the case of an overdose.

Of course, overdoses and overdose deaths can still happen in tent cities. After all, the drug supply is toxic in BC and we are in the midst of a public-health emergency. However, they are more effective than shelters and supportive housing at saving people’s lives.

In my affidavit to Branch, I shared my observations and expert opinion as a harm-reduction nurse. If he truly considered the harms of forcefully closing Camp Namegans, I believe that his decision fails to reflect that. In my opinion, the decision sets a dangerous legal precedent in BC. Homelessness is a social and a health issue, not a legal issue.

This decision proves (once again) that the legal system is not equipped to understand the complexity of tent cities. A system that creates more harms to the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in our society is not a just system. ▼

# A gateway to intergenerational connection

## UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND SENIORS FORGE FRIENDSHIPS AND LIFELONG LEARNING AT GATEWAY LODGE IN PRINCE GEORGE

Sonya Kruger

How can intergenerational living benefit university students and seniors? As part of an innovative pilot study and new experiential learning course this past fall, two students from the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) spent four months living in Northern Health's Gateway Lodge, a residential care facility in Prince George, BC. There, they spent time engaging with and learning from Gateway residents.



*Sonya is a communications officer with the University of Northern British Columbia. Born and raised in northern BC, she has more than 15 years of communications experience in health care and education. In her spare time, Sonya enjoys reading, collecting records and testing out new recipes from around the globe*

Photo credit: SolStock at ©iStockphoto.com

The success of the pilot led to its continuation for the Winter 2019 semester.

Led by UNBC's Dr. Shannon Freeman and Professor Dawn Hemingway, the Intergenerational Activities for Growth and Engagement project (InterAGE) is a unique research partnership between UNBC and Northern Health. Through InterAGE, students live at Gateway Lodge full-time, while still taking

other university courses as part of their regular semester. The students spend part of each week over the four-month period connecting with the lodge's residents during meals and different recreational events.

The project is one of the first of its kind in BC to focus on intergenerational cohousing from a research perspective. Freeman and Hemingway, together with their UNBC research team, have

developed a comprehensive research and evaluation plan to measure the project's outcomes from multiple perspectives—including those of residents, students and the Gateway facility—through the collection of information from all those involved in the initiative.

"The pilot study with the UNBC students and residents of Gateway exceeded all of our expectations," enthused Freeman, an assistant professor in the School of Nursing at UNBC, in an interview with the author. "The UNBC special topics course is taught on-site at the Gateway Lodge and attended by the UNBC students, residents, staff and members of the community. It has challenged the students to be reflective and to see aging not only through their own eyes but through the eyes of the residents that they ended up developing close connections with."

Hemingway, an associate professor and chair of the School of Social Work at UNBC, added, "From the residents' perspective, we saw people engaged who had not regularly joined facility activities previously, and we also had a higher number of residents than we expected regularly attending and participating in our class."

Student participants are provided with accommodation at Gateway Lodge for the school semester, living in areas that are not allocated for resident use. Over the semester, they also receive several complimentary meal tickets per month. During a typical week, students spend 10 to 15 hours meeting residents and enjoying activities together—such as playing bocce ball, knitting, playing crib or dominoes and sharing stories.

Chantelle Jimenez, a fourth-year nursing student who was part of the Fall 2018 pilot, spoke positively about her experience. "I didn't think it would be that easy to fit right in," she said. "But it was a very comfortable transition. We made friends the second we walked through the door. We didn't expect to make such a change in their lives. We gave them time to be present and they were very open and friendly, sharing many memories with us. I also learned a lot of practical things, such as how to knit and sew.

"I enjoyed hearing about the stories from the war. I'd never met anyone previously who had lived through World War II. One of the residents was a Red Cross nurse in the war and, as a nursing student, it was so nice to find someone in the same profession. We talked about how she had grown as a nurse, what my current studies were like, how practice has changed, and she shared some great advice with me."

As part of the project, students were assigned several resident "buddies," whom they sought to connect with regularly. This intermingling with residents throughout the facility led to many other meaningful connections as well.

Chandler Blokland, a fourth-year psychology student who was also part of the fall pilot, remarked thoughtfully, "It gave me a firsthand look into the lives of elderly residents, and understanding how we age, as well as the level of care we receive when we age, which provided some great insights into my aspirations for a future career in medicine. The experience of living there was unbelievable. With the

residents, they love you and they take you in as one of the family.

"Some of my more memorable visits were with a resident who did not have a lot of family and was very lonely. Whenever I stopped in their room, they were so happy that someone had come to visit and chat. Every time I showed up, I made their day and they made mine."

Jason Jaswal, Director of Long Term Care and Support Services with Northern Health in Prince George, has also found the InterAGE project to be a positive addition to Gateway Lodge's program. "There have been many wonderful activities enjoyed and relationships forged throughout this project, which has enriched the quality of life for all our participants," he observed. "One aspect that I think is really important is that the students also experienced some uncomfortable moments and interactions that come with residing in a care home, which can be a lonely place and socially isolating.

"You also have to say goodbye to friends and neighbours that pass away, which causes sadness and heavy hearts. I believe that this experience is going to serve the participating students well as they move on to their future ventures."

Hemingway clearly agrees. "The experience all around has been very positive, and is a reminder that older adults have as much life experience and expertise to share with young people as students have to share with seniors. The research component was also critical and will allow us to move forward with further cohousing initiatives knowing we're on solid footing."

Freeman adds, “Overall, it’s been an exciting and forward-looking undertaking that I feel certain will improve the lives of both the students and the residents in ways that we have yet to identify.”

Freeman, Hemingway, Gateway Lodge and Northern Health are excited about the potential for the InterAGE project to improve seniors’ health and quality of life in northern BC—but also across Canada and beyond.

Freeman explains, “While different models of this type of living arrangement have been practised elsewhere in the world over the past two decades,

to date, we have found only anecdotal results of the benefits. We are aiming to critically demonstrate, through our research, the value of this kind of initiative.”

Hemingway adds a final note about the project’s broader implications: “Indeed, this project, which is already recruiting students for the 2019-2020 school year, not only opens the door to the possibility for other types of intergenerational housing in existing supported housing locations within communities, but also for the planning of future housing needs among university students and older adults alike.” ▽

## Visions wants you to know about another intergenerational housing project – for the Indigenous community

Another innovative project is being provided in Kamloops by Lii Michif Otipemisiwak (LMO) Family and Community Services for Indigenous youth, who are overrepresented in the child welfare system. When youth age out of the system at 19 years old, they no longer receive Ministry supports, putting them at serious risk of homelessness as well as loss of identity, family, community and culture.

*Kikékyelc: A place of belonging* is an affordable, culturally-safe apartment complex of 31 units for Indigenous Elders housed together with Indigenous youth aged 16–27 who have experience with the child welfare system or who have aged out of care. “Ki-kek-yel-c” means to cover young protectively, how birds wrap wings around their young. The name was gifted to LMO by a group of Secwepemc speakers to honour the territory. “A Place of Belonging” is the name of the first LMO housing project and honours the Métis and the efforts of the organization to bring this much needed project to life.

“With the support and guidance from our LMO Elder’s Council, Indigenous Youth Advisory Committee and members of our Indigenous community, we are working

together to develop a culturally safe home that honours the integrity of our young Indigenous population. Our housing will be an alcohol, drug and violence free environment. It will have studio and 1 bedroom apartments, accessible suites, a kekuli common space, a common kitchen, coin laundry facilities, green space, social spaces, resident Elders, cultural mentors and in-house support workers. Cohousing Elders with our youth fosters the traditional elder-youth relationship, strengthening our community and cultivating a sense of belonging to all our residents. We honour our Elders and youth as having genuine, undeniable value.” – Lii Michif Otipemisiwak Family and Community Services

Construction is set to begin, with full operations set for Fall 2020. Financing and funding is through BC Housing. For more information contact Seanna Proulx, LMO Indigenous Youth & Housing Manager (250-554-9486 or seanna.proulx@lmofcs.ca) or Lindsay Monk, Project Manager at M’akola Development Services (778-401-5329 or lmonk@makoladev.com).

# Tiny homes

## A GOOD OPTION FOR THE BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

Samantha Gambling, MSc, and Shari Laliberte, RN, PhD

Safe, secure housing is fundamental to our health.<sup>1</sup> Poor living conditions and unsafe, unaffordable or insecure housing situations increase our risk of health challenges.<sup>2-4</sup> As cities across BC face an ongoing affordable-housing crisis,<sup>5</sup> it is becoming clear that having access to high-quality housing options is critical for our mental, physical and emotional well-being.

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*The contributors acknowledge that the writing and preparation of this paper occurred on unceded Coast Salish territory*



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Tiny House Transitional village in Eugene, Oregon

Tiny homes are a unique option that can gently increase density in cities and meet the increasing calls for more affordable housing.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, tiny homes have potential to improve ecological sustainability and help foster closer social relationships and human interactions, which benefits the wider community.<sup>7</sup> Although more research needs to be

done, plenty of anecdotal evidence supports these claims. Arguably, certain features of tiny homes, and the lifestyle that tiny homes enable, have a positive impact on their residents, the broader community and the surrounding natural environment.

Currently, there is no strict definition of "tiny home." The most familiar

version of the tiny home—made popular by television documentaries and social media—is a small, moveable, custom-built single-family home. But the tiny-home model is a flexible one, and the idea of a small, environmentally sustainable housing option can be shaped to suit whatever population it serves. Over the past 5 to 10 years, tiny-house “villages” have received international attention. These examples are built to meet the needs of multiple diverse populations, including renters looking for sustainable and affordable solutions to high real estate prices and soaring rental rates, veterans,<sup>8</sup> Indigenous activists,<sup>9</sup> environmentally conscious communities, people with disabilities and people experiencing homelessness.<sup>10</sup>

### Less money, less clutter, less worry

Tiny homes are cheaper to build and easier to maintain than large homes. This can offer residents greater financial freedom and even the possibility of home ownership with relief from mortgage debt, which can have positive effects on our mental and physical health.<sup>11,12</sup> Because a tiny home requires less money to maintain, the financial benefits are ongoing—not simply a matter of whether someone can afford to buy a home, but whether someone can afford to live comfortably and sustainably over the long term.

Living in a tiny home often requires the individual or the family to re-think their attachment to possessions. Moving into a tiny home usually involves downsizing—reducing one’s amount of “stuff.” While initially it may be hard to let go of some of our personal things, downsizing makes for less clutter and, ultimately, less maintenance.<sup>13</sup>

Reduced clutter is beneficial for a person’s sense of well-being and their sense of home.<sup>14, 15</sup>

Tiny homes typically range in size from 80 to 700 square feet. This might seem small, but the literature suggests that the size of a home is less important than the design—of both the house and of the neighbourhood where the tiny house is situated.<sup>16-18</sup> Most important is the ease with which one is able to perform daily living activities.<sup>19</sup>

Personal satisfaction with one’s home is also related to how one views their home in comparison to other homes in the community. Are the homes equal in size and comfort?<sup>20</sup> Are they aesthetically pleasing? A person’s health in their home is affected by the amount of natural light, the ventilation and pollution levels (and one’s perception of pollution levels), as well as relationships with neighbours<sup>21, 22</sup> and being close to outdoor green space.<sup>23</sup>

### Human connection and participation

Tiny homes increase opportunities for human interaction and can foster social inclusion. In urban settings, tiny homes placed on vacant and under-developed land can offer an affordable place to live in neighbourhoods that are already well served by public transportation systems. In suburban and rural settings, tiny homes can be placed as a solitary unit or in a community setting with other tiny homes. In this context, tiny homes can be managed using a co-op or condominium model, or they can function as private homes or rental units.<sup>24</sup>

When tiny homes are placed in intentional communities, residents have options for sharing communal resources to decrease costs and increase access to amenities.<sup>25, 26</sup> For example, a tiny-house community might share laundry facilities and communal kitchen, storage and community meeting spaces.<sup>24</sup> In the “Simply Home” tiny-house community in Portland, Oregon, residents share garden and eating spaces, as well as tasks to keep the community functioning—from technology management to growing and ordering food.<sup>25</sup>

Participating in a community with a common social goal can foster good interpersonal relationships. It can also help promote mutual aid and empathy among individuals, which benefits the broader society.<sup>21</sup> Examples of tiny-home communities for homeless populations in the US suggest that the “intentional living component” is the key feature valued by residents, allowing for self-management, community-governance and peer support.<sup>27</sup> Community governance—where diverse people are engaged in wider community decision-making processes with shared decision-making power—aligns with a core primary health care principle referred to as “public participation.”<sup>28</sup> This process enables people to increase control over factors that impact their health and well-being, which is the definition of health promotion according to the World Health Organization.<sup>29</sup>

The recent Red Women Rising report<sup>30</sup> addresses these issues in its recommendations to prevent further violence towards Indigenous women



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In the “Simply Home” tiny-house community in Portland, Oregon, residents share garden and eating spaces, as well as tasks to keep the community functioning—from technology management to growing and ordering food.

and children and to honour the central role of women in our communities. Among other things, the report calls for homes for everyone—homes of at least 400 square feet: “There should be tiny homes for every homeless person in Canada so people can live independently and grow their own food, and not be controlled or dependent on ... government systems of oppression.”<sup>30</sup>

### Creative independence and flexibility

Tiny-home designs are customizable, allowing residents to plan their living space, tailoring their homes to their unique needs, tastes and budget. Many tiny-home owners are involved in the design and building process

in a hands-on way, enabling them to build practical skill sets while exercising creative independence and experiencing a sense of pride and true ownership in the tiny-home project.<sup>31-33</sup>

Tiny homes can be used as temporary or permanent living spaces. When mounted on wheels or temporary foundations, they are cheaper to build than permanent housing and offer residents the option to relocate as their needs and circumstances change. Another factor that makes tiny homes a potentially healthy option is that they are ground-oriented, allowing residents easy access to the outside world. In contrast, living on the upper floors of a high-rise is correlated with anxiety and social isola-

tion, as well as lower physical activity, behavioural problems and respiratory illnesses in children.<sup>21</sup>

### Sustainable living

Many tiny-home enthusiasts are motivated by an environmental sustainability ethic and incorporate alternative, off-grid technologies and sustainable designs and construction practices to reduce their carbon footprint. For example, some tiny homes incorporate solar panels, rainwater collection and filtration systems and composting or incinerating toilets. Smaller homes also require fewer resources and less land than larger homes, which may have significant environmental benefits.

Such “green” practices have the potential not only to reduce negative environmental impacts of development but also to improve our health and enhance our lives.<sup>37</sup> Incorporating renewable energy sources and reused building materials and contributing one’s own time and skills towards the construction of a tiny home can lower housing costs and enable affordable home ownership.<sup>34-36</sup> Generating one’s own energy needs can foster a sense of independence, self-reliance and security.<sup>31,38</sup> And being part of wider environmental sustainability movements—feeling like we’re part of the solution—can also help reduce the mental and emotional stress of environmental threats like climate change.<sup>39</sup>

Inevitably, “tiny living” shapes an individual’s relationship with physical goods, encouraging a greater awareness of waste and consumption—forcing us to reconsider how much, after all, we need in order to live a good life. Tiny living has

the potential to play a key role in a longer-term cultural shift towards a more eco-centric ethic.<sup>40, 41</sup>

### A big future for tiny homes

Despite their benefits, tiny homes are not yet legal in BC. This is due in part to difficulties in regulating building codes and zoning bylaws for tiny, mobile dwellings (especially those incorporating off-grid technologies) and to negative public perception about the impact of tiny homes on the economy and health of the population.

Municipalities are starting to take steps to include this housing option in their community plans, however. For example, the City of Vancouver's "housing reset" strategy identified tiny houses as a built form to explore.<sup>42</sup> The City of Victoria is also

considering tiny houses as one option for affordable home ownership.<sup>43</sup>

In the meantime, the tiny-home movement is growing from the ground up. Across the province, it is becoming more commonplace to find tiny homes and tiny-home communities being built under the radar, with the most ardent enthusiasts being those who live in tiny homes themselves and are passionate about creating sustainable, affordable communities.

More research and community dialogue is needed to explore how different housing options impact people's mental health and well-being. However, our observations and experiences so far suggest that if tiny homes are designed, built and placed in ways that promote affordability, sustainability and social connectedness, they could offer us

much more than a way to increase the supply of affordable housing: they hold the promise of helping us create deeper connections with each other, improve our relationship with the natural world and meet the needs of diverse, growing communities across BC. ▼

## going tiny

My dream to "go tiny" began after grad school. I was broke and idealistic, and tiny homes aligned with my economic situation and ethical values. I dreamed of a stable home I could afford, at a social and ecological price I was comfortable to pay. Though in hindsight my decision to build and live in a tiny house looks naively optimistic—I've had my share of struggles with municipal bylaws, building companies and my own personal health—sitting now in my tiny home with my cat, Fig, beside me, I can finally reflect on the journey. And I'm so glad I took it. To me, tiny living is not all about living smaller. It's about acknowledging and taking responsibility for the impact that our daily actions have on our environment, our communities and our own health. It's about living mindfully, without excess. It's about living slower, so that you can lead a fuller, more joyful and more connected life. And it's about living the changes we want to see in our society.



Samantha Gambling, co-author

# resources

## BC Housing

[www.bchousing.org](http://www.bchousing.org)

BC Housing administers subsidized housing in BC, including shelters and homeless outreach, supportive housing, social housing, and rent subsidies for people who rent in the private market. Visit [www.bchousing.org/housing-assistance](http://www.bchousing.org/housing-assistance) for an overview of housing services, eligibility requirements, and application information.

## TRAC: Tenant Resource & Advisory Centre

[tenants.bc.ca](http://tenants.bc.ca)

Find resources for tenants, including the Tenant Survival Guide, Renting It Right program, and template letters. Call the Tenant Infoline at 604-255-0546 or 1-800-665-1185 for more information about renting in BC. The Tenant Infoline is available from 1.00pm – 5.00pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays and from 5.30pm – 8.30pm on Wednesdays.

## Vancouver Tenants Union

[www.vancouvertenantsunion.ca](http://www.vancouvertenantsunion.ca)

The Vancouver Tenants Union (with a branch for New Westminster) represents tenants and supports action for fair and just housing for all. Find resources like the Eviction Self-Defence Workbook, Renter's Rights posters, organizing guides, and a list of tenancy advocates around the Lower Mainland.

## Government of BC: Housing and Tenancies

[www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/housing-tenancy](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/housing-tenancy)

Information about home ownership, strata housing, rental housing (including the Residential Tenancy Branch), and affordable and social housing.

## Pacific Housing Research Network

[phrnbc.com](http://phrnbc.com)

Pacific Housing Research Network brings together researchers in communities and researchers at BC universities. Find the BC Research Repository to explore innovative housing solutions and approaches, and learn more about housing in BC..

## Learn more about innovative housing approaches

- Cohousing: Canadian Cohousing Network at [www.cohousing.ca](http://www.cohousing.ca)
- Small housing, including tiny homes: Small Housing BC at [www.smallhousingbc.org](http://www.smallhousingbc.org)
- Collective housing: Collective Housing Society at [collectivehousing.weebly.com](http://collectivehousing.weebly.com)
- Intergenerational housing: find promising practices and strategies in the US-based report *Intergenerational Programming in Senior Housing: From Promise to Practice* at [cnpea.ca/images/intergenerational\\_programming\\_in\\_senior\\_housing\\_final.pdf](http://cnpea.ca/images/intergenerational_programming_in_senior_housing_final.pdf)

 This list is not comprehensive and does not necessarily imply endorsement of all the content available in these resources.



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