

# The Experiences of The Dream Team

## A submission to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's consultation on Human Rights and Rental Housing, August 29, 2007

### **We have seen discrimination throughout the private rental market.**

Sometimes we have been refused housing because we are mentally ill or on social assistance. More often, we have been referred by hospitals to squalid or inappropriate housing. We accept this accommodation because it is all that we can find. But we cannot imagine such housing being offered to people leaving hospital for other reasons, and we cannot imagine the government funding housing such as this for other groups.

We realize that there are good and bad landlords, and good and bad boarding homes. Some organizations, such as Habitat Services in Toronto, have made strong efforts to improve boarding home standards, monitor and inspect properties, fund cooling equipment, and promote recovery-oriented supports. However, we have also encountered many truly unlivable situations. Here are some of our experiences:

*"I tried to get into an apartment in Parkdale, but I was turned down because I was on a government cheque."*

*"I was in Tower Ten at Scarborough General, and was referred to a boarding house on Gerrard Street East. The house was very poorly run. There wasn't enough supervision. You couldn't tell which was greener – the potatoes or the bread. COTA [a support agency] refused to go in there after a while. We found out later that the house was owned by the referring staff at Scarborough General."*

*"Lots of boarding house operators make you agree to sign over your cheques. They imply it is a condition of residence. But who is watching to make sure the tenants are actually getting their full payment? It's the same with medication. They take control over your meds. That means if no-one is on staff overnight, you can't get access to your own medications."*

*"I'm from Newfoundland, which is usually 20 years behind the times. But I found that when it comes to boarding houses, Toronto's not much different. I lived in a house where the owners drank and were abusive. I didn't speak up, but a young woman who lived there did. They just readmitted her to hospital."*

*"So much of the housing involves shared rooms. It's ridiculous. You can't have your own room. Shared rooms don't work. Per diems need to be set so that each person has the dignity of their own room."*

*"Boarding house owners shouldn't be able to benefit from others' misfortune. There are people with mental illness living horrendous lives, living in poverty, warehoused, with little or no voice. Our government is paying gazillions of dollars to subsidize these houses while we live on bread and potatoes, or food past the 'best before' date. People rot away in these places."*

**These practices continue because of the stigma associated with mental illness.** We understand that the Commission may not see its role as upholding building maintenance standards or regulating shared accommodation. However, we believe you can play an important role in upholding our rights as people with disabilities who are being subjected to intolerable conditions *because of our disability*.

**These practices also continue because there are so few housing choices available to people with mental illness.** We believe that the solution to these intolerable conditions is to increase the supply of affordable housing with support services.

Our members have been satisfied with both traditional supportive housing, which provide permanent affordable housing and community programs, as well as rent supplements with individualized supports. We recognize that not every supportive housing unit is problem-free. Theft, sexual harassment, violence and drugs can all be found in supportive housing. In Toronto, bed bugs and cockroaches can also be a terrible part of life in supportive housing. However, we all believe that more supportive and affordable housing is the key to addressing discrimination in housing.

### **We also see that prejudices and fears are an obstacle to creating much-needed supportive housing.**

Many of our members have worked to support new supportive housing development. In that process, we have seen discriminatory, abusive and sometimes just plain silly behavior. Here are some stories:

*"For Mainstay's new building on Danforth, I partnered with staff going door-to-door to businesses and houses. One of the business owners said, 'I don't want crazy people moving in here.' I said, 'Do I look like someone with mental illness?' He said 'OK, you can move in but the other people can't.' Meanwhile, someone came down the street screaming, 'Don't*

*talk to these people' – meaning us. We were afraid that after we moved in they'd throw eggs at us."*

*"Most people complained that taxes in the neighbourhood would go up, even though the housing is paid for province-wide. Others said there would be too many cars. We told them we don't drive cars. So they'd come up with something else."*

*"In my building, the original address was on Bracondale Hill. The neighbours made us change the address to Davenport Road so we couldn't be associated with them in any way."*

*"When I left the public meeting on Broadview, people were following me down the street still screaming at me."*

*"I was co-chairing a public meeting for Houselink in Riverdale. They called us rapists, pedophiles, murderers – even terrorists. I don't think one person listened to anything I said."*

*"People are just crazy at these meetings. They yell. They scream. They say ridiculous things. But with the label we have, if any of us 'went crazy' at these events, we are dismissed or condemned."*

*"It's painful. It's hurtful. People with mental illness are used to being talked about and being run down. Our self-esteem is so low that we expect this. We try to let it go over our heads. But enough is enough."*

## **We also see systemic barriers to creating more affordable housing.**

Why is it that rooming houses are permitted only in Toronto and Etobicoke, but not in Scarborough, York or North York?

Why do city councilors threaten to put the kybosh on supportive housing unless we hold more consultations than other forms of housing? Why do they add consultation requirements to supportive housing even when it is bought "as of right"? Why do they cave in when ratepayers complain "there's not enough consultation" when it's obvious they only want to stop the housing from being built?

Why are there distancing requirements between some kinds of housing, purely because of the people living in the house have a disability and need some support? Why are caps or quotas or moratoria put on supportive housing but not other types of housing?

Every one of these practices is designed to exclude people with mental illness or people on social assistance. All of these practices limit the supply of affordable housing.

## **We know that this discrimination is based on unfounded fears.**

We believe "there is nothing in life to fear, just to understand." We know that many people fear people with mental illness, and think supportive housing will ruin the neighbourhood. But as one of our members said, "They think we're pedophiles and serial killers.

When it turns out we're just Regular Joes, it's a bit of a letdown."

Many studies show that supportive housing does not reduce property values or increase crime. The Dream Team's own research says the same. We have just completed the field work on research in partnership with the Wellesley Foundation. Dream Team members went door-to-door in a neighbourhood with two supportive housing buildings, one built 14 years ago by AIS, and the other built by Houselink two years ago. We learned that many people were completely unaware that the buildings were supportive housing. A person who had lived in the house beside AIS for 14 years thought it was a wonderful building. Another neighbour who had lived on that street for 35 years was extremely positive. Everyone said that their property values had gone up. The big issues in the area are not supportive housing, but a concert venue and strip joint on Queen Street and speed bumps.

Politicians have also told us that they never hear complaints about supportive housing once it is occupied. For example, in a submission to the OMB, Michael Prue said that in his 13 years in office, there had always been protests before supportive housing was built, but once it's in, there is no problem. Joe Mihevc has said he has never had a single complaint about Houselink's Davenport building – the building the Bracondale Hill neighbours didn't want to share an address with.

## **We also know that the enforcement of human rights can make a difference.**

Three years ago, the Dream Team partnered with the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario to intervene in an Ontario Municipal Board appeal. St. Jude's had been given City approval to develop a new 30-unit supportive housing development near Parliament and Gerrard. After some truly horrible public meetings, the local ratepayers decided to appeal the Council decision to the OMB. St. Jude's resident and Dream Team member Neil MacQuaid spoke at the hearing. ACTO's legal counsel, Mary Truemmer, attended all sessions to ensure that no discriminatory arguments were put forward.

This strategy worked. We saw that, in contrast to the public meetings, the opposition was quite subdued. Their chief argument was that the neighbourhood was "not good enough" for St. Jude's residents. The OMB approved St. Jude's. Residents have now moved in and the neighbours have been courteous to the new residents.

But we know that the costs of this approach are not sustainable. ACTO cannot attend every public meeting, community council meeting, committee of adjustment hearing and OMB hearing to monitor the process.

We also note the costs of this process to both St. Jude's and the community. St. Jude's estimates that NIMBY has cost it \$400,000 – \$13,000 per unit – in construction delays, design changes to meet neighbour's concerns, and experts for the OMB hearing itself. This is money that could have been much better spent creating new housing. The ratepayers lost \$120,000 on the OMB hearing – money they could have spent improving the neighbourhood. (The ratepayers actually had the nerve to ask St. Jude's residents to help cover their legal costs!)

## **Our recommendations to the Commission:**

### **Prohibit discriminatory NIMBY.**

We have worked closely with HomeComing Community Choice Coalition, which works to ensure people with mental illness can live in the neighbourhood of their choice. We have read their recommendations to the Commission and agree with them all. In particular, we ask the Commission to:

Affirm that Not-In-My-Backyard discrimination is a human rights violation, and that anyone who tried to keep people with mental illness out of certain neighbourhoods, streets or buildings is violating the Code.

Work with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to identify and prohibit discriminatory municipal practices, including:

- Zoning definitions that disadvantage people with mental illness,
- Minimum distancing requirements, caps or quotas,
- Interim control by-laws or development moratoria designed to limit housing for people with mental illness,
- Public consultation protocols that require supportive housing to hold more consultations than housing for other people, design requirements that stigmatize us or segregate us from our neighbours.

Work with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to help decision-makers remove and replace discriminatory planning practices.

### **Press the provincial government to build more supportive housing.**

Every one of our members can say that supportive housing changed our lives. Some of us were homeless for years. We know that homeless people cannot begin to get a job or recover – our only thoughts are our next meal and where we’re going to stay. It is only when you have stable home that you can pull your life together.

We also know that that discrimination and intolerable housing thrives when housing is scarce. We therefore urge the Commission do everything in its power to gain more provincial funding for supportive housing.

### **Reduce poverty.**

We ask the Commission to bring the same influence to address the many income issues that affect people with mental illness. Social assistance rates have never been restored to pre-Harris levels. The minimum wage continues to lag behind the cost of living. Even people who can find full-time work cannot earn enough to pay market rents.

We also see cuts to City-administered programs. For example, many of us receive TTC allowances to do volunteer work. We are now learning that only people looking for paid work will be eligible for this allowance – volunteer work will not be recognized.

### **Promote good landlord practices.**

We have found that the following practices breach our rights, prevent us from finding and keeping good housing, and undermine our dignity:

Requiring first and last month’s rent. Most supportive housing providers do not ask for first and last months’ rent, but other landlords do. Either ODSP and OW should fund these last months’ rent deposits, or they should not be permitted.

Breaching our privacy. We understand that the property manager in a rent supplement building, a co-op co-ordinator, or a supportive housing worker will know that we have a mental illness. But this information should not be shared with other tenants or co-op members.

Shared rooms. This is an issue in private boarding homes, in Habitat and other rooming houses, and in some supportive housing as well. We believe the standard practice for permanent housing should be that unrelated adults can have their own room and be able to lock their door.

Losing our housing while we are in hospital. People with mental illness never know when they will get sick, or how long they will be in hospital. Many supportive housing providers will hold your housing while you are hospitalized. But in the private market, if you go into hospital and can’t pay your rent, you lose your housing and can end up on the street.

We ask the Commission to investigate each of these common practices and make recommendations to the Ministries that fund social assistance and supportive housing, including the Ministries of Community and Social Service, Health and Long-Term Care, Municipal Affairs and Housing, and municipal service managers.

### **Add “social condition” to the prohibited grounds for discrimination.**

We agree with the Commission that many more people need protection than are explicitly protected in the Code, including homeless people, people with addictions and people with low incomes or no income at all. Sometimes we see people oppose supportive housing in their neighbourhood because it houses one or more of these groups. By recognizing such people in the Code, the Commission will remove one more barrier to the creation of more supportive housing.

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