



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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## Lessons from Toronto: Winnipeg's Rooming House challenge

**O**n April 16th, 2014, a fire broke out in a rooming house on Enfield Crescent in Winnipeg's St. Boniface neighbourhood. The fire resulted in the death of an elderly man and injuries to several other residents of the building. This tragic event served as somber precursor to the release of the May 2014 report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives- Manitoba, *Rooming Houses to Rooming Homes*. With the release of this report, a community forum was held and drew an audience of over 100, including community members, community agency staff, rooming house tenants, City and Provincial employees, and others. The community forum started an important and long-overdue dialogue about the many complicated issues surrounding Winnipeg rooming houses.

In Winnipeg, there are 223 known rooming houses- these are buildings which are licensed with the City of Winnipeg and have met basic health and safety requirements. The majority of those buildings are concentrated in inner city neighbourhoods like Spence, West Broadway, and Point Douglas; they also tend to house some of Winnipeg's most vulnerable individuals characterized by low incomes, physical and mental health concerns, and addictions. The number of rooming houses has been in steady decline for decades and with each closure or conversion Winnipeg loses affordable housing units and in turn, many individuals return to homelessness.

Rooming houses are on the City and Provincial Government's radar. In his

platform promises, Mayor Brian Bowman pledged to renovate core area rooming houses through the use of tax-increment financing in hopes of reducing homelessness; and in recent years, there has been an increase in fire and by-law inspections of local rooming houses. However, rooming houses were not mentioned in the recent State of the City address or the City budget. On the Provincial side, a cross-departmental committee was set up in 2013 to tackle rooming house issues and the province offers forgivable loans to operators to bring properties up to minimum standards. After the May 2014 forum, the City and Province formed a Task Force with representation from community organizations and landlords to address the challenges facing rooming house tenants and this aging housing stock. Action on these complex issues in Winnipeg's inner city is moving forward, but the pace of change is slow.

### Searching for Inspiration

Winnipeg is by no means unique in its struggle to adequately address rooming house issues. Cities across Canada have been dealing with these same issues, some for decades. To find solutions to Winnipeg's paradox, it is essential to look at our counterparts and how they have addressed rooming houses in their jurisdictions. There are over 200 legally operating rooming houses in the City of Toronto, these buildings and the affordable units within them are steadily declining in number due to gentrification of Toronto's inner city, house-fires, rising rents, and building conversions.

In Toronto, the Municipal Government took ownership of the challenges related to rooming houses many years ago, making an ongoing commitment to working with local communities on these issues. City

there is an alternative.

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of Toronto-sponsored initiatives include community consultations, pilot projects to bring illegal buildings into compliance, by-law amendments, the funding of community efforts, and centralizing services for easy navigation by tenants and landlords. As a result, Toronto has seen a change in rooming house patterns- their existence has started to migrate to the inner suburbs of North York, East York and Scarborough where rooming houses are not permitted under zoning by-laws, meaning they are operating illegally. This is one of the reasons the City of Toronto is in the process of undertaking a 12-neighbourhood rooming house review to address issues relating to the condition and regulation of these buildings. The review will also look at implications any changes may have for both tenants and the broader community. An interdivisional rooming house working group has been formed with a mandate to undertake this review and make recommendations. The review includes a comprehensive four phase plan of jurisdictional scans, data collection/analysis, legislation and by-law reviews, and extensive consultations with key stakeholders and members of the public. The final report is expected to be delivered December 2015. While research agencies like the CCPA and the Institute of Urban Studies have worked with community organizations to examine local rooming house issues with a critical lens, Winnipeg as a municipality has not undertaken an official review of rooming houses in our city.

Stakeholders in Winnipeg's West Broadway neighbourhood are currently monitoring the possible closure of a local rooming house, home to nine individuals, because of a recently discovered zoning irregularity. The future of this building and its tenants is uncertain. We look to the approach taken by the City of Toronto, creating a coordinated response to address situations like this; this response was previously undertaken by the Rooming House Response Team (RHRT) which has recently been integrated with the City's Emergency Management program. Although every attempt is made to work with rooming house operators to bring buildings up to minimum standards and ensure vulnerable tenants

are not displaced, closures or temporary evacuations may still occur. When a rooming house is closed due to health/safety reasons or a fire, services are coordinated to assist tenants who lose their housing. In times of crisis, Toronto's Office of Emergency Management works with other city divisions (Fire, Buildings Municipal Licensing and Standards, Shelter Support and Housing Administration and Toronto Employment and Social Services), Police and other agencies like the Canadian Red Cross, and Woodgreen Community Services. By ensuring a coordinated, comprehensive response, tenants' needs are met in a holistic fashion and they are re-housed as quickly as possible. Winnipeg does not currently have a group that functions as a RHRT or an emergency plan regarding rooming houses, however, the City does make efforts to ensure that those displaced by fire or closure are at least temporarily re-housed and connected with available resources.

The City of Winnipeg and the Province of Manitoba have begun to look at rooming houses as an essential form of affordable housing and have recognized that the bricks and mortar and social issues surrounding them will not resolve themselves. We still have a long way to go in adequately addressing this crisis, but as Winnipeg embarks on what will be a difficult journey, we can feel hopeful when we look to other jurisdictions like Toronto for inspiration. We can see the strides they have made and continue to make with their tailored and understanding approaches to ensure rooming houses remain an affordable, safe form of housing.

*Jovan Lottis is the Rooming House Outreach Program Coordinator at West Broadway Community Organization, co-author of Rooming Houses to Rooming Homes, a member of the Rooming House Task Force and Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Research Associate. We acknowledge funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Manitoba Research Alliance.*

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