



RentSafe Update

April 2016

Over the past year, RentSafe partner organizations have been carrying out baseline research to better understand tenants' experiences with unhealthy housing conditions and their efforts to get help, as well as the capacity and approaches of the various agencies/sectors that are, or could be, in a position to address unhealthy conditions in rental housing. These efforts are outlined below.

■ Focus groups with tenants

Focus groups with tenants on low-income were held in urban and rural regions of Ontario from June to August 2015, with a total of 80 participants. Four focus groups were held in Toronto, led by Toronto Public Health and South Riverdale Community Health Centre, 3 focus groups were held in the Grey Bruce region, led by the Grey Bruce Health Unit, and 2 focus groups were held in Lanark County, hosted by The Table Community Food Centre in Perth. Key findings include:

- Tenants reported multiple indoor environmental health issues in their housing units, including water and sewage leaks, mould, pests, poor ventilation, structural issues (e.g. broken doors, windows), broken/unsafe appliances, improper wiring, and security concerns.
- Tenants also talked about problems with landlords/building managers, including disrespect, intimidation, racism, and unreasonable requests to remediate problems on their own.
- Tenants suffer adverse physical/mental/social health impacts as a result of substandard housing.
- Tenants reported approaching multiple agencies/actors for assistance (e.g., municipal licensing and standards, public health, housing workers, legal aid clinics, social workers, tenant committees, city councilors, community health centres, family doctors); some met with success in resolving their concerns but many received only partial/temporary resolution ("band-aid" repairs) or no resolution, resulting in frustration and discouragement. Mitigation of substandard housing conditions is hampered by landlord apathy, unclear/unenforced standards, and an overwhelming Landlord-Tenant Board process.
- Rural aspects include stigmatization ("black-listing" of tenants) and transportation barriers.
- Tenants put forth ideas on opportunities for improvement in the realms of regulation and enforcement, education (e.g., in tenants' and landlords' rights and responsibilities), navigation (e.g., effective direction/referral of tenants, creation of an ombudsperson role) and coordination among agencies/actors.

"Multiple levels of people to deal with – there's so much bureaucracy, it will never get solved."

"Tenants aren't in proper emotional place to jump through lots of hoops."

"When you get beat down so much, you can only take so much."

"I did not know my rights, I did not know how to go about it, so my kids and I became homeless. I learned through the process there's different ways to go. ...[U]sing my voice to [say] to others hey, try this route..."

- RentSafe tenant focus group participants

■ Public health unit (PHU) survey

The PHU survey was completed in October 2015, with responses received from all 36 of Ontario's public health units. Survey responses revealed wide variability in how PHUs interpret their mandate for responding to complaints about housing conditions, and varying degree of focus on health equity concerns and the needs of marginalized tenants. Key findings include:

- Most PHUs provide informational materials and over-the-phone consultations in response to indoor environmental health complaints.
- Over half of PHUs conduct on-site investigations for sewage, water issues, hoarding and mould; very few PHUs conduct on-site investigations for structural issues, thermal comfort (too hot/too cold), pesticides, and radon.

- Nearly three-quarters of PHUs refer issues to the building department or by-law enforcement; most (86%) rarely or never refer issues to legal aid; fewer than half feel that they always know where to refer the client.
- Fewer than half (47%) of PHUs feel they have adequate capacity and expertise to respond to indoor environmental health issues; most feel that confounding factors (e.g., mental health issues) challenge their ability to respond effectively.
- Fewer than half of PHUs believe that the majority of indoor environmental health concerns fall within their mandate.
- Approximately three-quarters of PHUs agree that housing conditions adversely affect the health of marginalized populations; fewer than half agree that this is a priority for their health unit; fewer than half of Ontario's PHUs have internal policies that address substandard housing issues for marginalized populations.
- Approx. half of PHUs are developing public policies to address inequities associated with access to safe, affordable & healthy housing.

"We are working well with partners...but more collaboration and awareness is needed to identify and address confounding factors e.g. mental health, hoarding, low-income, inadequate supply of safe, healthy rental housing, seniors issues, new immigrants"

- RentSafe PHU survey respondent

The survey was led by Helen Doyle, York Region Public Health and Chair of the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) Environmental Health Work Group, and Bob Hart, Grey Bruce Health Unit (GBHU), with survey analysis and report preparation provided by Lindsay MacDermid as an in-kind contribution from GBHU. The report is available at <http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/resources/rentsafe-public-health-unit-survey-summary-report>

▪ Survey of legal aid clinics and case law review

The RentSafe survey of legal aid clinics across Ontario was completed in November 2015, with responses received from 71 percent of Ontario's 80 legal aid clinics. The aim of the survey was to assess clinics' response to indoor environmental health issues in rental housing. Key findings include:

- Pests, mould, structural issues are the most common issues raised, followed by noise, inadequate heating, hoarding, and flooding; other issues occasionally/rarely come up.
- Approximately three-quarters of clinics often use Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO) or other informational resources (e.g., PHU, Landlord Tenant Board (LTB) resources); over 80% of respondents see a need for new/updated resources (addressing mould in particular, as well as pests, hoarding).
- Respondents noted many barriers facing tenants. The top 3 barriers cited were: fear of eviction; fear of need to move/pay higher rent for necessary repairs; and not knowing whom to call. Mental health was also noted as key barrier.
- Clinics most frequently make referrals to local by-law enforcement, the landlord, local PHU; more than 70% lack time to follow-up, and approximately 50% lack confidence that referrals will address concerns.
- Approximately 60% of respondents disagree that LTB repair orders will be enforced.
- Regarding clinics' capacity to respond to these issues, the most commonly cited challenge (~80%) was confounding factors (e.g., mental health, landlord-tenant relationship, and hoarding); other commonly cited challenges were: finding and paying for experts; getting PHU involved in addressing issues; lack of follow-up by LTB to enforce repair orders.
- More than 80% of respondents agree there is a need for effective implementation of local bylaws and HPPA.
- More than 90% of respondents agree that the *Residential Tenancies Act* should require provision of healthy rental housing.

"We are so busy dealing with eviction cases we do not have time for repair issues."

"[For] bed bugs, most tenants, especially on Social Assistance, do not have the financial means to deal with the issue; [ability to do laundering, etc.]"

"Many clients cannot read or write or are computer illiterate so it is difficult for them to access information about their rights."

"Tenants would rather move than deal with the issues."

- RentSafe legal aid survey respondents

The survey was led by Kathy Cooper, Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA), with survey analysis and report preparation provided by Lindsay MacDermid. The report is available at:

<http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/resources/rentsafe-legal-aid-survey-summary-report>

Parallel to the survey of legal aid clinics, CELA is conducting a case law review to assess whether and how indoor environmental health issues are addressed by tribunals and courts. The review will encompass the *Residential Tenancies Act*, decisions of the Landlord and Tenant Board and case law where there is judicial review of tribunal decisions, as well as aspects of the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and, to some degree, local property standards and bylaws.

Taken together, the legal aid clinic survey results and the case law review will inform recommendations for law reform and public legal education.

▪ **Municipal inspectors survey and focus groups**

As part of the Above Standard Housing initiative led by the Grey Bruce Poverty Task Force and as a contribution to RentSafe baseline research, Bob Hart and colleagues at the Grey Bruce Health Unit (a CPCHE affiliate) conducted a survey of municipal inspectors in the region, followed by focus groups with municipal and public health inspectors. Key findings include:

- significant overlap in the types of housing complaints received by municipalities and public health,
- significant uncertainty about the applicability of specific legislation in dealing with housing complaints,
- challenges specific to rural areas such as : multiple municipalities with small operating budgets, different by-laws and different perceptions of the importance of the issue, and
- interest among municipal inspectors to partner with public health to explore solutions.

GBHU is currently organizing a joint inspection pilot involving both public health and municipal inspectors.

▪ **Forthcoming survey of frontline workers /direct service providers**

As a result of the learnings from the tenant focus groups and PHU and legal aid surveys, the RentSafe Project Team identified the need to directly engage with “front-line” service providers such as public health nurses, housing support workers, social workers, etc. in order to get their perspectives on the issues and challenges faced by tenants on low-income in terms of housing conditions and their efforts to get help, and to better understand the current and potential capacities and interests among front-line staff to serve as a source of information and support for tenants on such issues. A draft survey has been prepared and reviewed by a focus group of relevant staff at SRCHC. We are currently seeking ethics review through Queen’s University, and anticipate the survey will be disseminated in May 2016 via a diverse array of professional associations and networks. The survey of front-line staff is being led by Caryn Thompson at SRCHC.

▪ **Forthcoming focus groups with landlords in Grey Bruce**

Grey Bruce Health Unit, as part of the Above Standard Housing initiative and as input into RentSafe, will be conducting focus groups with landlords in the Grey-Bruce region starting this spring.

▪ **RentSafe at recent/upcoming events:**

Following is an overview of recent and upcoming events in which RentSafe has been/will be featured:

- Webinar on Housing, Health Equity and Opportunities for Public Health, NCCDH / CHNET-Works!, 26 January 2016

Erica Phipps, CPCHE, presented the RentSafe initiative during a webinar organized by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health and hosted by CHNET-Works to an audience of approximately 240 people across Canada. The presentations and recording are available at: http://chnet-works.ca/index.php?option=com_rsevents&view=events&layout=show&cid=384%3A&Itemid=25&lang=en

- RentSafe panel at The Ontario Public Health Convention (TOPHC), Toronto, 6 April 2016

RentSafe Team members Erica Phipps, Jill McDowell, Bob Hart, Kathy Cooper, Helen Doyle and Caryn Thompson held a 90-minute panel presentation and discussion at TOPHC entitled *RentSafe: Intersectoral Action Towards Healthy Housing for Low-income Tenants in Ontario*. The presentation

is available at: <http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/resources/rentsafe-panel-session-ontario-public-health-convention-tophc>

- Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) Conference poster presentation, Toronto, 15 June 2016

RentSafe team members Helen Doyle, Bob Hart and Erica Phipps will present a poster on the RentSafe Public Health Unit survey and related efforts to engage with the public health sector at the June 2016 CPHA conference in Toronto.

▪ **Roundtable planning and development of baseline report**

Development of the RentSafe baseline report, reflecting the above-described baseline research and related opportunities/recommendations for action, will be a main focus of effort over the spring and summer, in preparation for the multi-stakeholder RentSafe Roundtable to be held at the McMaster Institute for Healthier Environments in November 2016 (date to be confirmed).

▪ **Fundraising and project development**

- Letter of Intent to the Law Foundation of Ontario for RentSafe regional intersectoral roundtables

In March, CPCHE and the Environmental Health Institute of Canada (EHI-Canada), the CPCHE partner organization that serves as the financial host for the Trillium RentSafe funding, submitted a Letter of Intent to the Law Foundation's responsive grants program, seeking funding to support a series of regional intersectoral roundtables in 2017. If funded, RentSafe collaborators CPCHE, EHI-Canada, ACTO, CELA, CEHE, CLEO, OPHA and SRCHC would work together to convene public health, legal aid, municipal inspection and front-line professionals for four half-day regional roundtables to discuss the results of the RentSafe baseline research and opportunities for improved intersectoral action on housing-related health risks affecting marginalized tenants. We will find out in June whether we will be invited to submit a full proposal.

- CEHE-led proACTIVE team grant proposal to CIHR

Jeff Masuda, Associate Professor at Queen's University and Director of the Centre for Environmental Health Equity (a CPCHE partner organization) is leading a team grant application to the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) for a five-year research initiative on the role of citizen action in advancing intersectoral collaboration to address environmental health equity challenges in small/mid-sized cities. RentSafe, and specifically the Above Standard Housing initiative in the Grey Bruce region, is one of the six sites for this proposed research initiative. The proACTIVE team made it past the first (Letter of Intent) stage of the competition and is one of 19 teams across the country invited to submit a full proposal. A total of 9 teams will be funded, with decisions announced in December 2016.

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<http://www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/collections/rentsafe>



RentSafe is an initiative of the
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