

RentSafe

A Collaborative Initiative to Address Indoor Environmental Health Risks Affecting Low-Income Tenants in Ontario

Project Overview

What is RentSafe?

RentSafe is an ambitious new initiative, led by the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE), to address indoor environmental health risks affecting low-income tenants in both urban and rural communities in Ontario. With active involvement of public health, legal aid, community health and other stakeholder organizations as well as tenants themselves, we aim to build awareness and capacity in the social services sector so that low-income tenants, when faced with lead, mould, pests, pesticides, radon and other indoor health threats, are better able to get the support they need to achieve healthier living conditions for themselves and their families. This 3-year initiative, launched in December 2014, is funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation via a grant to the Environmental Health Institute of Canada, which is serving as the lead CPCHE partner for the project. This core funding is supplemented by in-kind contributions from multiple project partners.

Why is RentSafe needed?

A growing body of scientific knowledge underscores the vital role that safe, healthy housing plays in preventing/reducing chronic health effects, supporting healthy child development and fostering physical and mental well-being. Low-income and marginalized tenants in Ontario experience not only housing insecurity but also significant indoor environmental health risks. Mould, lead, pesticides, pests, tobacco smoke, radon, noise, inadequate ventilation, excessive heat/cold, and chemicals from strong cleaners, renovation materials or fragranced products are among the housing-related factors that can affect residents' physical and/or mental health. Children, the elderly and people with existing medical conditions, including chemical sensitivities, are at the greatest risk. Children growing up in substandard housing are at risk of not reaching their full potential because of preventable damage to their developing bodies and brains. Unhealthy housing, therefore, serves to perpetuate and potentially increase health disparities and socio-economic inequities.

At present, there is insufficient capacity and coordination in the social services sector to effectively address housing-related risks to health and well-being in disadvantaged communities. Enhanced information and supports are needed to assist tenants and the service providers who work with them (e.g., legal aid staff, settlement workers, community and public health staff, tenants' advocates) in addressing the environmental health risks that exist in low-income housing.

What does RentSafe aim to achieve?

The primary aim of RentSafe is to improve knowledge, capacity and responsiveness within the social service sector to better address housing-related health risks facing low-income tenants, as an important step towards the goal of creating healthier living conditions in low-income/marginalized communities and reducing housing-related health inequities.

Through the coordinated efforts of many organizations and sectors, RentSafe will lead to:

- **a more tenant-centred system of support and assistance on housing-related health risks**, including improved coordination among service provider organizations, enhanced staff training and more accurate referrals about where tenants can go for assistance;
- **increased knowledge and empowerment among low-income tenants on housing-related health risks**, including how to seek and advocate for assistance and remediation; and

- **improved policy and systemic responses to housing-related health risks**, resulting in reduced exposures and health effects for residents and, ultimately, improved population health.

What will be done through RentSafe?

CPCHE, with guidance from the RentSafe Advisory Committee and with core elements led by contributing partners, will convene and facilitate the three-phased RentSafe initiative:

Phase 1: Baseline assessment and report: We will gather and synthesize knowledge and experience on priority indoor environmental health issues of concern for low-income tenants and assess the existing capacity within the social services sector to respond to such concerns, drawing upon province-wide surveys with the public health and legal aid sectors as well as focus groups with tenants in two urban and two rural communities. A summary baseline report will be prepared and publicly released.

Phase 2: Multi-stakeholder Roundtable: We will engage a broad range of stakeholders, including social services agencies, municipal/provincial/federal departments, tenants, landlords/building managers, housing advocates, health professionals and others in a facilitated Roundtable to solicit ideas and direction from those who are experiencing and/or are in a position to take action on these issues, with a particular focus on identifying actions and strategies for building social services capacity and responsiveness on indoor environmental health concerns in low-income housing.

Phase 3: Capacity building and education: Informed by the preceding phases, we will take steps to build knowledge, capacity and cross-linkages among relevant service providers and create more supportive conditions for tenants to obtain information and seek corrective action. Specifically, we will involve service providers in the development and use of (a) a video for educating/training service providers, medical students and others on the visible and invisible housing conditions that may be affecting their clients' health, and (b) outreach materials that service providers can adapt and use to increase public awareness on housing-related health risks and where/how to seek assistance.

Who is involved in RentSafe implementation?

The **Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE)** – a collaboration of 10 partner organizations and 5 affiliates with more than a decade of experience in advancing multi-sectoral collaboration towards healthier indoor and outdoor environments for children and families – is leading the RentSafe initiative. The **Environmental Health Institute of Canada (EHI-Canada)** is the lead CPCHE partner for the initiative and the fiduciary host. A **RentSafe Advisory Committee** will provide overall guidance for the project and will facilitate sustained engagement of key organizations and sectors. The **RentSafe Project Team**, comprised of the organizations that are leading specific elements of the multi-faceted RentSafe initiative, will ensure effective project implementation.

Individual CPCHE partner/affiliate organizations will lead specific aspects of the work largely through in-kind contributions, including the **Canadian Environmental Law Association** (survey of legal aid clinics, review of relevant Landlord Tenant Board decisions), the **Ontario Public Health Association** (survey of public health units), **South Riverdale Community Health Centre** (tenant focus groups), **Toronto Public Health** (tenant focus groups), and the **Centre for Environmental Health Equity** at Queen's University (expertise on tenant engagement). Other RentSafe collaborating organizations include **Grey Bruce Health Unit** (survey of municipal property standards officials; survey of landlords; tenant focus groups), **Lanark Renfrew Health and Community Services** (tenant focus groups) and **McMaster Institute for Healthier Environments** (host of the Roundtable). Additional organizations, including the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario, Community Legal Education Ontario and the Wellesley Institute, among others, are also involved.

For more information:

Erica Phipps, Executive Director, CPCHE
erica@healthyenvironmentforkids.ca

