

The Above Standard Housing Project

2015 Summary Report with plans for 2016



Grey Bruce Health Unit

Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force Housing Action Group



Introduction:

Housing plays an immense and complex role in shaping our physical, mental and social well-being. Access, condition, proximity to environmental hazards, and connectedness with the rest of the community are all factors that determine whether housing contributes to or detracts from human health.

Substandard housing conditions (e.g. dampness, mould, inadequate heating/cooling, pest infestations) are a subset of these factors that has been well established as contributing to adverse health effects, especially among the poor, the elderly and those living with mental illness and addiction. However, focused efforts to understand and work collaboratively to address the root causes of these conditions are largely absent.

Recognizing this absence, the Grey Bruce Health Unit (GBHU), in partnership with the Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force, initiated the Above Standard Housing Project (ASH) in 2014. ASH seeks in the short term to better understand the local factors that contribute to the persistence of substandard housing conditions. In the long term, it is hoped this understanding will inform the development of strategies/initiatives that will improve and sustain housing conditions; in other words from “substandard” to “above standard”.

As well as its local activities, ASH is a partner in [RentSafe](#), a province-wide initiative coordinated by the Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment. *RentSafe* is an intersectoral initiative that seeks to address indoor environmental health risks affecting low-income tenants, with active involvement of numerous stakeholders who have initiated capacity building projects throughout Ontario. All of the projects are slightly different, but all are united in seeking ways to improve housing conditions for marginalized populations. Alignment with *RentSafe* affords ASH the opportunity to learn from other project partners and to contribute in a significant way to the body of knowledge related to substandard housing mitigation.

This report provides a review of the work undertaken by ASH in 2015 and a brief description of the activities planned for 2016. *(This reports also appears as a component of the March, 2016 Board of Health meeting minutes.)*

2015 IN REVIEW

Tenant Focus Groups

Tenant focus groups were conducted by Grey Bruce Health Unit staff in order to find out what kind of substandard housing conditions are encountered by low income tenants; how these conditions affect them; and how they have handled these situations. Three focus groups were conducted in Grey Bruce with a total of 22 low income tenant participants. Substandard

housing was defined as “the physical conditions of a house or apartment... referring to heating and cooling issues, pest infestations, leaks, dampness, mould, and structural hazards and safety concerns”.

The information gleaned from these sessions can be categorized into three general themes: concerns about physical health and safety; psychosocial impacts; and regulatory shortcomings.

Concerns about Health and Safety

Tenants shared detailed descriptions of poorly maintained homes as per the definition of substandard housing described above. These conditions included lack of adequate heat; plumbing and roof leaks creating damp and mouldy conditions; bed bug, cockroach and rodent infestations; and structural faults creating physical safety hazards. The presence of these conditions in turn resulted in significant health and safety concerns. Tenants reported symptoms and conditions that included respiratory illness (including asthma) rashes, falls/injuries (as a result of structural faults) and exacerbation of existing mental illness. These symptoms/conditions often required emergency room visits or doctor’s appointments.

Psychosocial Impacts

Tenants identified a myriad of psychosocial impacts as a consequence of living in the conditions described above. For example, tenants discussed how embarrassment about their living conditions prevented them from inviting friends and family to visit. They described feelings of frustration and hopelessness because they could not change their situation, and anger towards landlords for not fixing obvious discrepancies and treating them with disrespect. Some also expressed fear that their living conditions could result in the removal of their children from their home by child protection services.

Regulatory Shortcomings

Tenants also described frustration and confusion with the mechanisms in place to deal with substandard housing conditions. Tenants identified lack of clear housing standards as a major barrier. Some noted that while landlords tended to adhere to Fire Code requirements (which are clearly defined) other aspects of adequate housing were less clearly defined and therefore compliance and enforcement were lacking. Tenants therefore believed that housing standards/guidelines and accountability for housing repairs should be a provincial systematic process. They recommended annual inspections of rental properties by mandated provincial/municipal jurisdictions as a method of ensuring increased compliance of standards.

Tenants also reported frustration with the Landlord and Tenant board process which they viewed as overwhelming and prohibitive. Tenants expressed a need for better educational resources and advocates who could assist them in navigating this process.

As a result of these discussions, two Grey Bruce tenants who participated in the focus groups were asked to become part of the *RentSafe* Advisory Committee to provide recommendations from their lived experience perspective. This committee will meet for 3 years and create short and long term recommendations for housing improvement in Ontario.

Municipal Property Standards Enforcement and Public Health Inspection Liaison

Housing inspection and enforcement activities can be effective tools in addressing substandard conditions. Health units and municipal property standards programs share responsibility for responding to complaints about substandard housing. However, these responsibilities often overlap and it is sometimes unclear which agency (if either) should take the lead on specific types of complaints.

These issues were discussed at a focus group session hosted by GBHU in Walkerton on November 2nd. The purpose of the session was to bring public health inspectors and property standards enforcement officers together to share information about their work and explore possible ways of working more effectively together. The key themes arising from the discussion were

1. As indicated above, there is a significant amount of overlap in the types of complaints responded to by public health and municipal property standards.
2. It would be useful for property standards enforcement officers to be aware of housing complaint investigations being carried out by GBHU in their locales.
3. There is potential for property standards enforcement and public health to collaborate on specific issues, for example complaints of mould in rental housing.

As a result of these discussions, a process has been implemented whereby all housing complaints triggering an inspection by GBHU are brought to the attention of the local municipality. This allows for a more consistent/coordinated effort between public health and property standards enforcement should the latter also be investigating the complaint.

As well, work is underway to carry out a pilot project involving GBHU and selected municipalities that will identify opportunities for collaborative action. For more information about this project, please refer to *Plans for 2016* below.

RentSafe Provincial Health Unit Survey

In addition to the local consultation with municipal property standards described above, ASH worked with other *RentSafe* partners to survey all 36 Ontario public health units about their response to housing complaints. The survey sought information about the types of complaints received by health units, the approach taken in responding to them, and the extent to which health unit staff work with other stakeholders in attempting to resolve substandard housing issues.

The results of the survey indicate that Ontario health units have widely different views about the applicability of public health legislation in dealing with substandard housing issues. As a result, there is a correspondingly wide range of approaches to complaint response among health units. *RentSafe* project participants intend to further consult with health units this year in order to understand the reasons for this variation.

For more information about the survey, please refer to the report attached as Appendix A. GBHU took the lead in compiling the survey, analyzing the results and producing the report.

PLANS FOR 2016

Landlord Consultation

ASH will conduct a series of focus group sessions with landlords in 2016. The format of the sessions will largely follow that used in 2015 to engage tenants. The sessions will seek to understand landlords' perspectives on the challenges they face in maintaining their properties, and to consider ideas that could assist them in addressing these challenges.

Property Standards/Public Health Collaboration Project

Following on the 2015 consultations described above, GBHU will engage in a pilot project with interested municipalities to explore collaborative approaches to addressing substandard housing issues.

While the exact scope and nature of the project has yet to be defined, its broad goal is to create a climate that encourages complaint/issue data sharing, coordinated enforcement action, joint training where appropriate, and opportunities for relevant policy development

Funding Request for Eviction Prevention Initiatives

The YMCA of Owen Sound Grey Bruce has applied for funds to support its activities related to Eviction Prevention. If the proposal is successful, funds will be used to hire coordinators who will use a case management approach in addressing landlord and tenant issues.

Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force Housing Action Group

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