



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Rooming Houses to Rooming Homes

In Winnipeg's inner city, and especially in West Broadway and Spence neighbourhoods, older homes converted to rooming houses are an important type of housing for many people living on low incomes. However, rooming houses are fast disappearing due to an uncoordinated policy and regulatory framework and market pressures. In addition, there are many day-to-day problems associated with rooming houses related to challenges of poverty and aging housing stock. Research finds that these interrelated issues should be dealt with together. Saving rooming houses should be a priority; this type of housing is viable when well-maintained and connected with social supports.

Low-income people in Winnipeg struggle to find safe, adequate and affordable housing. Rooming houses are part of the range of housing options and a step away from homelessness for many. Along with Single Room Occupancy Hotels, rooming houses are the least expensive private market housing type for single adults, with rents ranging from \$300 - \$425 per month. Options exist in public, not-for-profit or cooperative housing, and arguably the public sector is better placed to provide housing explicitly designed to meet the needs of low-income people. However this housing may not be accessible to tenants due to wait lists or requirements for a clean rental record.

A rooming house is a dwelling with multiple rooms rented out individually, with shared bathrooms and kitchens. In

inner city Winnipeg, rooming houses are home to single adults with low incomes and houses are over 100 years old. The Institute of Urban Studies (IUS) finds there are approximately 184 confirmed or possible rooming houses in Spence and West Broadway neighbourhoods, representing 1,817 units of housing. The number is hard to pin down as not all rooming houses are licensed, and residents of the area also identified unlicensed houses in the count. The City licenses rooming houses as "Converted Residential Dwellings with Shared Facilities", however data from the City also includes licensed "Converted Residential Dwellings", self-contained units such as triplexes. Both of these types of facilities are blended together in the City's data on rooming houses, making it difficult to track the number of houses.

In the past 15 years, between 930 – 1,410 rooming house units have been lost in Spence and West Broadway alone, resulting in displacement of low-income tenants. New housing cannot be built fast enough. Since large-scale federal programs focused on building new social housing ended in 1993, very few new units of housing have been built across Canada. In Manitoba, the government committed to building new units of rent-geared to income housing; approximately 250 of these were built in the inner city of Winnipeg. Taking into account the loss of rooming house units and the ones that have been created,

there is an alternative.

CCPA-MB
765 Main St.
Winnipeg, MB
R2W 3N5

phone

(204) 927-3200

email

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

website

[www.policyalternatives.ca/
manitoba](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba)

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@ccpamb

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there has been a net loss of 680 – 1,160 units of low-income housing in the Spence and West Broadway neighbourhoods.

In response to concerns about the loss of single, adult low-income housing, Spence Neighbourhood Association and the West Broadway Community Organization have taken action to help build community while rehabilitating these often deteriorating buildings. With core funding from the Province of Manitoba's Neighbourhoods Alive! and the City of Winnipeg, Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations (NRCs) like Spence and West Broadway are providing exterior fix up grants to rooming houses. They have also developed pilot outreach projects to work with tenants and landlords to address the challenges of rooming houses. For example, in West Broadway, the Rooming House Outreach Program (RHOP) provides specialized supports to tenants in five rooming houses with a goal of reaching eight houses by the August 2014 end date. RHOP focuses on small-scale fix ups completed with voluntary help of the tenants and co-funded by the landlords and public grants funded by the City of Winnipeg. Efforts to foster a sense of ownership and belonging among tenants are a best practice when working with rooming houses.

People living in poverty struggle on a daily basis to make ends meet. Employment and Income Assistance is low, so the provincial commitment in the 2014 budget to increase shelter benefit to 75 percent of median market rent is a big step forward. As most people who live in rooming houses are on EIA, the province has a role to ensure the \$6 million contributed by EIA annually for rooming house rent is paying for quality housing. The province regulates the rent through the Residential Tenancy's Act, however it is the City that licenses rooming houses.

Four different arms of city government regulate rooming houses: City licensing, Doing Business in Winnipeg, Livability Bylaw and Fire Prevention. Fires are a

major concern, sadly in the past three years there have been 10 rooming house fires with six people killed. Until just recently the Fire Prevention Branch inspected rooming houses on a complaint basis only; they started doing routine inspections in the fall. The Province governs the list of facilities mandated for inspections; rooming houses are not on this list, but hospitals and childcare facilities are.

Another major concern is washroom facilities. The National and Manitoba Building Code and the City's Livability bylaw set the minimum ratio of washrooms to tenants at 10:1, a ratio at which maintaining basic hygiene and sanitary standards are virtually impossible in a shared setting. Researchers and organizers explain this ratio should be 4:1.

As rooming houses provide needed housing to low-income people, government needs to take steps to slow the loss and support outreach programs for tenants. Complex problems require collaborative solutions and community organizations want the City and Province to come to the table and take part in a collaborative committee to address rooming house issues. At the same time, new housing is required to meet the needs of low income people, preferably built and maintained by the public sector, with its multiple bottom line of social, economic and environmental benefit.

Molly McCracken, Director, CCPA MB

Rooming Houses to Rooming Homes, a new report and video from the CCPA MB, is being launched today at a Community Forum on rooming houses at Convocation Hall, University of Winnipeg.

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CCPA-MB
765 Main St.
Winnipeg, MB
R2W 3N5

phone
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email
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website
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