



**CCPA**

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
MANITOBA

# **Social Housing With Supports**

**The Case of WestEnd Commons**

By Jessica Klassen

JULY  
2016

**Social Housing with Supports —  
The Case of WestEnd Commons**

**ISBN 978-1-77125-297-3**

**JULY 2016**

This report is available free of charge from the CCPA website at [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca). Printed copies may be ordered through the Manitoba Office for a \$10 fee.

Help us continue to offer our publications free online.

We make most of our publications available free on our website. Making a donation or taking out a membership will help us continue to provide people with access to our ideas and research free of charge. You can make a donation or become a member on-line at [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca). Or you can contact the Manitoba office at 204-927-3200 for more information. Suggested donation for this publication: \$10 or what you can afford.



**CCPA**

CANADIAN CENTRE  
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
MANITOBA OFFICE

Unit 205 – 765 Main St., Winnipeg, MB R2W 3N5  
TEL 204-927-3200 FAX 204-927-3201  
EMAIL [ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca](mailto:ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca)



**About the Author:**

Jessica Klassen is a researcher with the Manitoba Research Alliance. She has been a volunteer with WestEnd Commons for three years.

**Acknowledgements**

Funding for this research is provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Manitoba Research Alliance grant: Partnering for Change — Community-based Solutions for Aboriginal and Inner-city Poverty. Credit to Finley Photography for the photos within the report.

I acknowledge and appreciate the support of Jim Silver, Molly McCracken, Lynne Fernandez, Karen Schlichting, Josh Brandon, Ray Silvius, Cathy Campbell, Genny Funk-Unrau and Jenna Drabble.

Thank you to the residents of WestEnd Commons for sharing your stories and showing what community in action looks like.



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

**Canada**

# Social Housing with Supports — The Case of WestEnd Commons

Since late 2014, twenty-six families in Winnipeg's inner city have been living in a new, supportive social and affordable housing complex called WestEnd Commons. The innovative development was retrofitted in the 100-year-old St. Matthew's Anglican Church building. Church and community leaders worked for years to build the affordable family housing complex in Winnipeg's low-income West End neighbourhood. In addition to reduced rents, WestEnd Commons has a vision to create community and increase social inclusion in this inner city neighbourhood.

WestEnd Commons hosts three components: a Neighbourhood Resource Centre, a number of independent faith communities and the twenty-six housing units. The Neighbourhood Resource Centre is a social enterprise that rents space to various community-based organizations providing essential services to people in the West End. Community members have long relied on the services and support provided by this welcoming community space, such as a food bank, drop-in, free computer and phone, sewing programs, artists' circles, meeting and event space and a commercial kitchen. Seven communities worship within the walls of West-

End Commons, including St. Matthew's Anglican Church, Grain of Wheat Church-Community, Shiloh Apostolic, Emmanuel Mission and others. Finally, twenty-six units of social and affordable family housing have been erected within the walls of the church.

The idea for this ambitious project was conceived in a difficult time for the housing sector. Federal investments in housing have decreased by over 46 percent over the last twenty-five years, while the Canadian population has grown by almost 30 percent (Gaetz et al., 2014), meaning fewer affordable housing options remain for a growing number of Canadians. Locally, Manitoba Housing Renewal Corporation (MHRC) spent years acting as property manager of a deteriorating public housing stock with little capacity or intention to increase the supply of social and affordable housing, although that has changed in the past decade. Despite these odds, St. Matthews Non-Profit Housing Inc. was formed by a driven group of church and community leaders in 2009, with WestEnd Commons as its first build.

This report explores the interplay between low-cost housing with supports, and social and economic inclusion in society, through inter-

views with twenty-one residents. It is evident that living in WestEnd Commons has increased residents' economic inclusion through the provi-

sion of subsidized rents, and has increased their social inclusion through supportive policies and programming.

# Methodology

This report is part of a three-year qualitative case study, conducted as part of a partnership between the Manitoba Research Alliance and WestEnd Commons. Using a community-based research methodology, the research will investigate the changes and impacts that occur for families while living in WestEnd Commons. Interested residents will be interviewed once a year for three years, with the goal of gaining a fuller, long-term understanding of the impact on their lives of subsidized housing with supports. This research is part of a broader three-part longitudinal housing research project titled “Beyond Bricks and Mortar: Housing and Community Supports in Manitoba,” collaborating with research projects conducted at the Manitoba Interfaith Immigra-

tion Council and the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba.

Participant observation is a method of data collection used in community-based research that I employ throughout this project. I have been a volunteer with WestEnd Commons for three years as a member of the Community Life Committee. This immersion in the project adds to the information gained from the formal interview process and facilitates a relationship of trust and familiarity with the residents.

For this first year report, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-one residents at WestEnd Commons in April, May and June of 2015. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a broad understanding of the histories of

**TABLE 1 Selected Demographics of Residents Interviewed April, May and June, 2015**

Immigrant or refugee	38%
Born in Canada	57%
Indigenous	29%
Single parent households	22%
CFS involvement in past or present	17%
Receiving income support (EIA, OAS, foster care)	72%
Currently employed (one or more members of the household)	44%
Currently in educational program (upgrading, university, English classes)	22%

the residents, including their housing histories, and their initial impressions of living at West-End Commons. The main themes that the interviews covered were: housing, family, education and work, safety, community involvement and future goals.

Eighteen households out of twenty-six participated in interviews, meaning representatives from 69 percent of the households at WestEnd Commons were interviewed. 71 percent of those interviewed were women and 29 percent were men. Table 1 below includes selected demographic characteristics of the residents interviewed.

Childminding and interpretation were provided to residents to facilitate their involvement

in the project. Residents received a \$25 honourarium for participating in an interview. Interview participants will be contacted for subsequent interviews in years two and three of the project.

I also conducted interviews with key informants to provide context regarding the project, including Carolyn Ryan, Manitoba Housing and Community Development, Executive Director of Portfolio Management; Cathy Campbell, former priest at St. Matthews Anglican Church and former Vice-President of the WestEnd Commons board; Genny Funk-Unrau, St. Matthew's Non-Profit Housing Inc. board member; and Jenna Drabble, Community Connector at WestEnd Commons.

# Social Policy and Affordable Housing in Canada

Between the 1950s and 1990s, Canada's social housing program was robust, with the federal government leading the way through signing long-term operating agreements with social housing providers (Cooper, 2015). Following the global trend, this changed in the 1990s when neoliberal policies were enacted, resulting in social and housing programs being drastically cut. The shift represented the federal government moving "from a policy of rehousing to one of dehousing" (Hulchanski, 2006; as cited in Gaetz, 2010, p. 22). While the 1980s saw a gradual reduction in spending on social and affordable housing, the 1990s saw the termination of new spending, though existing social housing subsidies continued (Gaetz, 2010).

Housing policies do not operate in a vacuum, nor do neoliberal policies. Increased income inequality, reductions in government support for health, post-secondary education and social welfare services (through the introduction of the Canada Health and Social Transfer in 1995), and balanced budgets were also at play. Vulnerable Canadians were hardest hit, with low-income earners, single parents, Indigenous people, visible minorities and new Canadians bearing the brunt of the austerity measures (Gaetz, 2010). The

end result: more Canadians were paying a larger percentage of their increasingly low incomes on housing that was harder to find. In 2011, 10.3 percent of Winnipeg households lived in unaffordable, inadequate or unsuitable housing (Cooper and Skelton, 2015), with the rate being even higher for renters at 53 percent (Brandon, 2014). Homelessness increased, as did food bank usage.

## Social and Affordable Housing Definitions

**Affordable housing:** Housing that costs 30 percent or less of household income. This usually refers to housing below median rent/price; often restricted to middle or moderate income households, for example families with less than \$64,000 per year.

**Social housing:** A broader term that includes housing owned by Manitoba Housing Renewal Corporation as well as housing owned by non-profit organizations, that is rented at a subsidized rate for households with limited or fixed incomes.

**Source:** Brandon, 2015a

Responsibility for housing was transferred from the federal government to the provinces in 1996. This was a difficult change as provinces had previously built their public housing program-

ming largely around federal initiatives (Carter 2009). Manitoba's Department of Family Services and Housing (now Manitoba Families) continued its limited role during this time essentially as a property manager, barely maintaining its narrow mandate to update and renovate existing housing stock.

In 2009, Manitoba Family Services and Housing underwent an overhaul and moved beyond its role as a property manager. Manitoba's NDP government invested heavily in social and affordable housing, committing to build 1,500 units of each (for a total of 3,000 units) between 2009–2014, and committing to another 500 units of each over three years until 2017. In addition, the provincial government made very substantial investments in upgrading existing Manitoba Housing Renewal Corporation (MHRC) stock. WestEnd Commons was made possible due to the initial housing commitments made in 2009.

Although the federal government largely abandoned new social housing in the 1990s, it has nevertheless funded cost-shared housing initiatives. A variety of federal and provincial housing agreements have resulted, the first being the Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI). Federal and provincial governments matched funding 50/50 through these agreements, although the federal funding levels remained insufficient to meet

the need. Carolyn Ryan, Executive Director of Portfolio Management with Manitoba Housing, said in an interview conducted in 2014 that the current Investments and Affordable Housing (IAH) agreement has had Manitoba overmatching the federal government's contribution by a five to one ratio since the 2009 commitments indicated above. Municipal funding levels have remained even more marginal than federal levels. She spoke of the dismal federal and municipal housing funding levels, which put severe pressure on both the province and the community to pick up the slack.

Making the situation worse, the long-term operating agreements that provide federal subsidies for public housing are expiring. This means that the number of social housing units receiving government subsidies is dropping, and will continue to do so (Cooper, 2015). To date, expired social housing operating agreements have ended subsidies for 70,000 units, which represent 10 percent of Canada's social housing. It is expected that, once again, provinces and territories will have to absorb the subsidy costs. The alternative is to risk more than 50 percent of Canada's social housing stock (Pomeroy, 2015). Manitoba's 35,000 units of social housing are all at risk as the operating agreements expire (Cooper, 2015).

# Housing, Limited Incomes and Social Exclusion

Securing housing that is adequate and affordable is difficult on a limited income. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) uses the concept of “core housing need” to determine the number of Canadian households that are in need of housing that is appropriate and adequate. Three measures are used to determine this:

- **Affordability:** Households spend more than 30 percent of their gross income on housing
- **Suitability:** Households live in overcrowded conditions (household size and composition exceeds their actual home space requirements)
- **Adequacy:** Households require major repairs. (May, 2007, p. 8)

If housing does not meet one of these criteria, and the household cannot afford suitable and adequate housing in the local area, the household is considered in “core housing need”.

Employment and Income Assistance rates, and incomes in general, have not kept pace with rising housing costs. As Table 2 shows, 92 percent of households with incomes under \$10,000/year are spending more than 30 percent of their

income on shelter, as are almost 70 percent of households with incomes between \$10,000 and \$19,999 per year. Average rents in Winnipeg are unaffordable for people in these income brackets, making it exceedingly difficult for individuals and families with limited incomes to find safe and adequate housing.

Due to high rents and limited incomes, families are often forced to redirect money from their food budget to ensure that they can pay their rent (Hurtig, 2000), reducing both the quality and quantity of their food. Housing costs are fixed and when this fixed amount is too high proportional to a family’s income, food security decreases (Smirl, 2015). This highlights one way that housing is a social determinant of health. People living on limited incomes are less able to afford good quality and affordable housing, which in turn makes them more likely to experience poor physical and psychological health (Brandon, 2015c). The inability to afford healthy food due to high rents and limited incomes is but one example of the strong link between poor housing and poorer health.

Social, cultural and political exclusion often accompanies limited incomes and poor housing. Social exclusion, as this is often called, provides

TABLE 2 Affordability of Average Rents in Winnipeg CMA, 2011

Household Income (\$)	Monthly Affordability Range	Bachelor (\$585)	1 Bedroom (\$771)	2 Bedroom (\$1015)	3+ Bedroom (\$1188)	Proportion of Winnipeg households (2010)	Proportion spending more than 30% on shelter
Under 10,000	< \$250	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	5.2%	91.9%
10,000–19,999	\$250–\$500	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	7.9%	69.7%
20,000–29,999	\$500–\$750	Not affordable < \$23,400	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	8.9%	49.8%
30,000–39,999	\$750–\$1000	<i>Affordable</i>	Not affordable < \$30,840	<b>Not affordable</b>	<b>Not affordable</b>	9.9%	28%
40,000–59,999	\$1000–\$1250	<i>Affordable</i>	<i>Affordable</i>	Not affordable < \$40,600	Not affordable < \$47,520	18.1%	14%
60,000 and up	\$1250–\$1500	<i>Affordable</i>	<i>Affordable</i>	<i>Affordable</i>	<i>Affordable</i>	50%	2.3%

SOURCE: Brandon 2015a

### What Does Social Exclusion Look Like?

**Exclusion from civil society:** disconnection through legal sanctions, institutional mechanisms or system discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation and religion.

**Exclusion from social goods:** failure of society to provide for the needs of particular groups, such as housing for the homeless, language services for immigrants, and sanctions to deter discrimination.

**Exclusion from social production:** denial of opportunities to contribute to and participate actively in society.

**Economic exclusion:** unequal or lack of access to normal forms of livelihood.

**Source:** Galabuzi and Labonte 2002, as cited in Cooper 2013, p. 8

a broad lens that takes into account the multi-dimensional and relational nature of marginalization (van Katwyk and Klassen, forthcoming). It is a way of understanding the barriers, economic and beyond, that prevent people or groups from participating fully in society (May, 2007). Social exclusion describes both the structures and the processes that contribute to societal inequality (Galabuzi and Labonte 2002, as

cited in May 2007). Box 2 shows the four primary aspects of social exclusion that interact with one another.

If limited incomes and social exclusion are the challenges, then social inclusion is part of the solution. Social inclusion:

describes a circumstance in which people are a part of the ‘fabric of society’, which includes the economic, social, political, and cultural realms. It is a condition in which people are treated equally and equitably and they feel that their basic physical and mental needs are met. Social inclusion is one of the social determinants of health. (May 2007, p. 7)

Social inclusion is mutually reinforcing, as multiple inclusions strengthen a person’s overall well-being. Indicators of social inclusion are, for example, labour force attachment and access to education. A strong social network is also considered an avenue towards social inclusion, also known as social capital. This refers to the social networks that people build up and tap into for support and integration into society, thus increasing their social inclusion (Cooper, 2013).

WestEnd Commons has recognized social inclusion as a goal of their project, using subsidized housing as the foundation, and as a gate-

way through which people experience and connect to their immediate environment and larger society. Good quality, affordable housing with supports is essential for moving people from social exclusion to social inclusion (Chisholm, 2003). Low-income families benefit; so does society as a whole.

### **Social Housing with Supports is a Platform**

Lowering the cost of housing for people allows them a platform on which to stand in order to facilitate positive change in other aspects of their lives. Social housing that provides only affordable housing without making concessions to other aspects of people's lives in which they may need assistance only gets at half of the problem.

**Source:** May, 2007, p. 1

# WestEnd Commons

## History

For decades, St. Matthew's Anglican Church has served the West Central neighbourhood through its building. The congregation has worshiped in the building on the corner of St. Matthew's and Maryland since 1913, welcoming neighbourhood residents into the life of the church. Multiple social agencies are housed within the building, including the long-standing St. Matthew's-Maryland Community Ministry that provides community supports such as a food bank, drop-in area and access to telephones and computers. This area is now called the Neighbourhood Resource Centre and is the social enterprise that operates in the basement of WestEnd Commons.

However, the church has also faced significant challenges with its building, prompting the congregation to contemplate creative uses for the space within their four walls. The church, which once housed a congregation of 1200 parishioners, eventually was home to a committed 100 people, less than 10 percent of the peak size of the congregation. In addition to being too large for the congregation, the building was falling apart. Black mold produced poor air quality, the basement floor was eroding and rain was coming in all four corners of the building. Cathy Camp-

bell, St. Matthew's Anglican Church's priest at the time, said: "There was no way to cope with it and it was really a feeling like the building was a white elephant. It was just crushing the capacity of the group to be engaged and positive."

St. Matthew's Anglican Church and Grain of Wheat Church-Community partnered to create St. Matthew's Non-Profit Housing Inc. in 2009. The decision to incorporate and convert the existing 100-year-old building into affordable housing addressed two challenges. First, both congregations understood safe and affordable housing as the most pressing neighbourhood need. Through their years of being a part of the West Central community, the churches knew that many families living in the neighbourhood were unable to find adequate and affordable housing. The churches took a community development approach to accommodate families' multi-faceted needs, and prioritized coupling low-cost housing with supports. Second, St. Matthew's Anglican Church needed to change its financial structures to preserve its historic building. Incorporation as a non-profit housing provider took the financial burden and risk away from the church directly, and created a steady revenue stream of rental incomes from the residential and social enterprise



St. Matthew's Anglican Church's retrofitted sanctuary, which includes refurbished materials from the previous sanctuary and is approximately 1/10th the size.

**PHOTO CREDIT:** Finley Photography

tenants. This decision maintained the current building and made it sustainable for the future.

### Social and Affordable Housing with Supports

WestEnd Commons had the vision of providing housing at an affordable rate for the community. The journey to get there was long and arduous, taking dozens of volunteers many years to complete (for a fuller discussion of what follows see Klassen, 2015). St. Matthew's Anglican Church contributed \$200,000 in bequests to the project. Campbell, the priest, recalled: "I kept thinking if the church donates the building for free and puts in \$200,000 in cash, in equity, surely there's a way to do something around affordable housing." They juggled numbers for two years until they concluded that significant government in-

vestment was the only way to make their housing project affordable for low-income families. The federal government contributed \$787,000, the municipal government \$40,000 plus tax forgiveness, and the provincial government by far invested most heavily with \$1,875,000 and significant staff involvement throughout the project. WestEnd Commons would not exist without government and especially provincial government capital and ongoing support to subsidize the rents of the tenants. Of the twenty-six units, twenty are social housing units (subsidized, rent-geared-to-income) and six are affordable housing units (Median Market Rent, meaning a rent amount based on median rents in the private market).

Beyond reduced rents, WestEnd Commons has maintained a social inclusion lens throughout the inception and implementation of the project. Its philosophy stems from a commitment to re-

relationships and community. Campbell described the mutual care that was central to the project's vision of inclusion and support:

The WestEnd Commons is a community of communities. There'll be the tenants, there'll be church communities, there'll be neighbourhood resource centre agencies connecting out to the neighbourhood. And how is it that we pay attention to and make real commitment to and prioritize the relationships that we share with each other? Some of the relationships are structured economically but that's just one thread of a quite complex braid of history, of mutual respect, of finding a place, wanting people to have a place to worship, to eat, to live. How do we nurture that? In the long run, the question for our culture is how do we do that in a good way in real neighbourhoods in real time? Not by making ourselves all the same, not by gated communities, but real mixed folks who can take time and be together, and deal with their problems, deal with the struggles, but do it together.

### Supportive Programming and Policies

A Community Life Committee (CLC) was formed well before residents moved in to help foster an environment of community and support at WestEnd Commons. The CLC engages in activities such as making decisions and policies around the community life at WestEnd Commons, interviewing and choosing the residents, assisting with conflict resolution and planning special community events. The intentions of WestEnd Commons are bold. Angelika Jantz (2013), the former chair of the CLC, described the communal focus:

The name 'Commons' brings to mind a certain spirit and way of living together. In days gone by — and even now in towns and cities throughout the world — there would often be a place for people to gather, usually a central square or park known as 'the commons'. This

was a place that belonged equally to everyone: a place where issues pertaining to the community were discussed, joys celebrated and sorrows or difficulties carried together. Likewise, WestEnd Commons is interested in more than quality, affordable housing. We are also interested in collaborating with the residents to create safe, welcoming, inclusive, vibrant communities, which foster the well-being of the children and adults who live there.

WestEnd Commons' commitment to providing subsidized housing with supports attached is a tangible instance of this vision and mission. It has adopted supportive policies and programming in its provision of affordable housing, understanding the central role that housing plays in the lives of families.

A large role of the CLC is to support the work of the Community Connector staff person. The Community Connector was the only staff position at WestEnd Commons in its first year, hired well before a building manager. This speaks to the central role that this staff position plays in facilitating the supportive programming and environment at WestEnd Commons. The role of the Community Connector "involves trying to build community among the people that live here, as well as connecting them to resources and other things in the community that they could benefit from", says Jenna Drabble, the current Community Connector. She continues:

I organize monthly activities, I help facilitate tenant meetings, I make sure that tenants when they first move are made to feel welcome and that they're introduced to other tenants, so the sense of community that's developing here — people feel they can plug into it.

Drabble acts as the intermediary between WestEnd Commons and the residents. Tenant meetings are held monthly, giving the residents and Drabble a regular time to meet together to communicate about any arising issues. While she is



The atrium is the hub of activity at WestEnd Commons located in the centre of the complex.

**PHOTO CREDIT:** Finley Photography

responsible for coordinating programming, she prioritizes facilitating resident involvement in the planning and implementation of events and regular programs.

There are various changing programs at WestEnd Commons, including a resident-led family movie night, a community kitchen where the residents cook together, potlucks, a parenting program, an artist in residence who does community art with the residents, group walks, various information sessions for residents, and free trips to attractions such as the Children’s Museum and Bird’s Hill Park. The Community Connector also facilitates connections between residents and the wider community, including referrals to relevant social services, as well as educational, recreational, and employment opportunities.

A focus on community and support is also seen in the policies and environment built at

WestEnd Commons, demonstrated through the building design, the selection of residents and the relationship with the property management company.

**Building Design**

The building layout shows that facilitating community happens by design. The atrium is the central physical hub of WestEnd Commons (see Figure 2). It is a common place in the middle of the four floors of housing that includes the laundry room, space to sit and a play structure. Play among the children and connections among the adults occur in this space daily. Periodic celebrations and events are also held in the atrium.

Apartment size is also an example of inclusion and support by design. One, two, three and four bedroom apartments are available for subsidized and affordable rent. WestEnd Commons

prioritizes housing families in the West End, as it saw that they were either under-housed or moving away from the area. The three and four bedroom apartments fill a need in the neighbourhood and across the city for subsidized apartments for larger families.

Lastly, there are six fully physically accessible suites in WestEnd Commons. Accessible suites are difficult to find in rental units across Winnipeg, particularly subsidized units. These six suites are a small step in recognizing and filling that gap.

### **Selection of Residents**

Diversity has been prioritized when selecting residents of WestEnd Commons. It has ensured that WestEnd Commons' community mirrors the broader West End community by housing newcomer and Aboriginal families. This occurs in the selection process when new residents are chosen to live at WestEnd Commons.

WestEnd Commons has a partnership with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) that designates five apartments for families with mental health issues. WestEnd Commons receives referrals from the WRHA and partnering organizations, such as Canadian Mental Health Association. People are not required to have a formal diagnosis, but can be self-diagnosed or recommended by a worker who is supporting them. The WRHA has a staff representative who attends monthly meetings to review any issues or additional supports that need to be put in place. The WRHA also will hold a suite by paying rent for a limited number of months while it is working on finding a family with mental health issues that needs supportive and subsidized housing. Jenna Drabble, the Community Connector staff person at WestEnd Commons, said the goal of the agreement with the WRHA is to "address the major issue that people with mental health issues face in finding housing, and maintaining housing. We're hoping to provide a stable, safe and supportive community for them."

WestEnd Commons also prioritizes parents who are working to reunify with their children in the child welfare system. A lack of safe and appropriate housing often acts as a barrier in reunifying families. This is a major problem in Manitoba, where more than 10,000 children are in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS). WestEnd Commons staff and volunteers work with families whose last step in the reunification plan is housing. One parent discussed how previous living conditions and roommates were a part of why their two children remained in the care of CFS. Once the parent attained housing at WestEnd Commons and the CFS worker did a few home visits there, the parent's two children were returned to their care for the first time in the children's lives. Given Manitoba's crisis of the number of children, particularly Indigenous, in CFS care, WestEnd Commons' efforts in prioritizing family reunification are indeed significant.

### **S.A.M. Management Relationship**

S.A.M. Management is the property management company that St. Matthews Non-Profit Housing Inc. hires to manage WestEnd Commons. The relationship between S.A.M. Management and WestEnd Commons is a work in progress, as it is not a traditional property management/building owner relationship. S.A.M. Management is responsible for tasks including screening residents, collecting rent, maintaining the building and processing evictions. WestEnd Commons has a hand in all of these processes, ensuring that a people-centered approach is taken. This relationship is a pointed example of the efforts that WestEnd Commons takes to support the tenancy of their residents. Drabble discussed a number of processes in place to ensure "things are done in a fair way with respect for tenants and in a supportive way."

- **Screening process:** S.A.M. Management screens all applications received for tenancy at WestEnd Commons,

although WestEnd Commons reviews all applications in both the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ piles. Drabble explains:

There are tenants in the building that, if they had just gone through the S.A.M. Management process of screening, they wouldn’t be here because they had whatever flagged in their rental history, even if it was ten years ago. Or if they were coming from an apartment where they knew there were bed bugs they wouldn’t be able to move in here. And so I think from the beginning we were able to help people establish their tenancy here because we were willing to work with them and say we know this issue existed, but we’re now extending our trust that you are ready to live here. So far there hasn’t been any problems around those tenants.

- **Vandalism:** An incident of vandalism by a person connected to a resident at WestEnd Commons was caught on the security cameras. Drabble described the response:

Instead of issuing some kind of threat to the tenant or saying you’re at risk of losing your tenancy, we talked to the tenant about it. They cleaned the graffiti off and the problem was solved. I think that that’s more of a restorative justice approach and I think that works a lot better for getting people to be accountable. Then they feel a sense of ownership over the building, like we all have to respect this space

and be responsible when people we invite in don’t do that.

- **Rent Collection:** WestEnd Commons has an arrangement with S.A.M. Management to contact WestEnd Commons before issuing warnings and evictions due to rent collection issues. Drabble discussed a resident who was late on rent payments:

We just asked for the tenant to meet with us to talk about what was going on. Like, is there an issue with EIA? Did something happen there? Has something changed? Can we help you navigate that system? It only goes so far. People have to pay their rent, that’s part of living in this building. But we would extend support to anybody who’s having an issue paying their rent. Our immediate response isn’t going to be an evictions notice or a threat of eviction. We’re going to try to work with people before it gets to that stage.

Summing up this approach to balancing property management and care for people, Drabble concluded:

It’s acknowledging that people bring other stuff to the table than just being a tenant. Everyone that lives here is a valuable part of the community and we want them to be here. We know that they have lots to contribute and I think that the approach that we take acknowledges that.

# Findings

The goal of this three-year research project is to understand the impacts that social and affordable housing with supports has on residents over time. At the time of this first round of interviews with families at WestEnd Commons, residents had been living in the housing complex for between one and seven months. Families began to move into WestEnd Commons in November 2014, and the interviews for this project were in April, May and June 2015. While most impacts will take many months or years to come to light, initial impressions were sought from residents to understand early impacts, even in their short time living at WestEnd Commons.

## WestEnd Commons Residents' Past Housing Experiences

In order to assess the impact of WestEnd Commons over time, it is useful to look at the kinds of housing experiences that residents had before moving into WestEnd Commons. Residents spoke at length of their previous accommodations, referring to overcrowding, safety, pests, suitability and landlord issues, accessibility and isolation.

## Overcrowding

A household experiencing overcrowding means there are not enough bedrooms for the number of family members. This is one indication of core housing need, according to CMHC's definition. 39 percent of WestEnd Commons residents interviewed experienced overcrowding in their previous accommodations.

Residents described past experiences of overcrowding:

[My son] was in his own room by 7, so I got the living room and he got the only bedroom, so yeah. It was kind of cramped, I felt a little bit like a hoarder because everything, we couldn't unpack everything. And then before that we actually lived with a friend of mine for about two and a half years and we shared a one bedroom with another adult and we got the room and he got the living room, so we kind of were cramped.

It was one bedroom. I had like three beds there. (A family of four)

Well yeah, I lived there like with my dad and my mom and my sister and her boyfriend, her kid and my boyfriend and my child. So there was a lot of us. It was a four bedroom. But some of the

bedrooms were very small, we had the smallest one, so it was really hard living there. So that's why we moved.

### **Lack of Safety**

Finding affordable housing that is safe remains a challenge in Winnipeg's low-income neighbourhoods, particularly for families with children. Safety considerations refer both to feelings of security within one's immediate apartment or house, and within the wider neighbourhood. 56 percent of the residents interviewed explicitly stated that they did not feel safe in their previous accommodations, largely citing neighbourhood factors as the reason:

The North End you got to, you know, you watch. You're hoping and praying that you know today won't be your last day. I think it's that standoff that kind of made me change my mind, the last, you know that year they had that standoff in Stella [Avenue].

There was like bad neighbours. There was always like gang members running back and forth, cutting through the yard. And there was like, sometimes we'd hear like gunfire and fights all the time. I had to get into a couple of fights myself. Just too like get people out of my yard. People just drinking, like that street is like known for prostitutes too and they just like just go anywhere they want and do anything they want. It wasn't good for my kids. My kids were just growing up around that kind of crap.

Well it wasn't, wasn't like a safe place at all. I knew that on that block that was like a crack shack, you know, and it was just like I had my son and he was just a baby and... somebody tried to kick in my door because of the people who lived in the house before. In my old place I had to sleep with my lights on, like I was always scared to sleep. My son had his own room before at our other place but he just always slept with me 'cause he was always scared.

### **Pest Infestations**

A recurring characteristic of the residents' previous accommodations was the presence of pests, such as bed bugs, rodents, and cockroaches. 44 percent (four households unknown) of the residents interviewed had bed bug and mice infestations in their previous apartments. People described the emotional stress of pest and especially bed bug infestations.

I have a very hard time because I couldn't sleep when I had mice. Yeah, I can hear even at 2:00, midnight I wake up and looking for the mice.

Yeah, we had bed bugs it was really bad, and that created a lot of stress too, like the space already was too small but then the fact of having the bed bugs.

Economic stress due to bed bug infestations is common, as people often have to dispose of clothes and furniture in order to get rid of the bugs:

Yeah, had to get rid of like lots of furniture, got rid of some clothes. We had to throw away a lot of stuff.

I never hear about bed bug even in [our home country]. And then I have guests, I just told him what's this I found in my house and then he said yeah, it's a bed bug. And then I just threw all my furniture, yeah and then the caretaker came, just clean all the house for two weeks, no furniture, nothing.

I bought a whole bunch of furniture when we first moved in there. By October we were throwing our furniture out because they had bed bugs and none of it was being replaced by the property manager.

I lost furniture and I never got recompensated for it. So we were living on air mattresses for the next two and a half years I think it was. So that was hard as well because my son has a disability, so he was poking holes in things, so he was like destroying our air mattresses so I had to

replace them more than every few months. So it was just a toll financially all the time to replace mattresses or to patch them up, so it was just really stressful.

### **Housing Quality and Challenges With Landlords**

A number of residents expressed frustration at their previous landlords for their management styles and delays in repairing the suites:

The ceilings were like leaking and it was just like pretty, it was rundown.

The maintenance there sucked. It took a month or two to get something fixed. Our fridge broke down twice, our stove broke down, they had to replace it.

I didn't really like it. Because lots of things were falling apart over there, like, like when you'd turn on the tap the tap would fall off.

Two residents described how such problems caused emotional and physical stress, exacerbating mental health issues:

Our basement, our basement literally had one window and it was like the size of, I don't even know how to describe it. They had two windows, one was broken so we had to keep it like boarded up, so we had like this little shaft of light and it was just terrible. Like I have bipolar disorder, so actually natural sunlight is really really important.

We were dealing with a lot of stresses there because the caretaker was really hard. He didn't always follow the by-laws that you had to abide by when you were in RTB [Residential Tenancies Branch]. He thought he could get away with evicting people for any old reason and then they tried doing the same thing to me because I guess I complained about them coming in and not giving me written notice for twenty-four hours, you know. Then they said, like the wife

got really mad at me 'cause I phoned the rental company and complained, like if she comes in my apartment again I'm calling the cops. So that was the scary stress part there as well, always that threat of, oh we're going to kick you out 'cause we don't like you, kind of thing.

Some families had positive experiences with their previous landlords, citing quick turnarounds for repairs:

The landlady was very nice and any problems we had, like say, for example, if we had a leaky tap she would fix it almost within 24 hours.

I never just complained there, I mean just phone him and leave him a message, he just came exactly. He didn't say that tomorrow I'm coming, just today.

### **Lack of Accessibility**

Three residents, all with young children, expressed dissatisfaction with the accessibility of their previous accommodations:

So then I got the house it's a two bedroom on the third floor, it was kind of difficult for me 'cause I have to take the stroller and everything to the third floor.

I think too, like as part of being in a small space, having a new baby in the winter, I was like trapped there. This was on the third floor, so no elevator, so then try to get a stroller, a car seat, all those things up and down, then you don't want to go anywhere right. You go crazy 'cause you're home but you don't want to leave either because it's so much work.

And then it's in the third floor that I have a problem with the stairs, you know no elevators.

### **Isolation**

Connections to other people in their apartment blocks or larger communities were lacking in many families' previous accommodations:

It was very isolated, I don't drive anymore. [The person I lived with] couldn't drive anymore, so suddenly I'm stuck relying on her daughters to drive me places.

I was just like, I just stayed home with my daughter, like I was like I'm not going outside.

There was almost no connection to the community. The community was for us our house, our immediate neighbours, the clerk at the corner store. That was about as much community connection as I made. I felt at periods I was in a state of hermitage with my daughter all the time.

## Early Impacts of WestEnd Commons

### **Economic Impacts on Residents**

The effects of reduced rents were experienced immediately by many of the residents. In addition to accessing housing that is subsidized (a maximum of 27 percent of a household's income), residents discussed access to nutritious food and participation in a sharing economy within the building as additional financial benefits.

### *Affordable Rents*

Prior to moving into WestEnd Commons all of the residents in the twenty-six households were either living in housing that was too small for their family and/or paying rent higher than 30 percent of their income. Now, 100 percent of the households at WestEnd Commons have housing that is suitable for the size of their family or household. As of February 2015, 92 percent of the households were paying rent that was under 30 percent of their income. Six households at WestEnd Commons are not receiving subsidies and are paying median market rent (MMR) rates. As of February 2015, five of the MMR apartments were rented, and three of the renting households were paying less than 30 percent of their income on rent. The other two were encouraged by WestEnd Commons to apply for the Mani-

toba Housing Rental Supplement to help reduce their housing cost.

The difference in rent had an impact on how families were able to spend their money. One resident described how a \$400 difference in monthly rent affects their household:

We can like go out and go to a movie or something. Have extra money put away. For like birthdays and stuff. [Before we] just had to go to the food bank every once in a while if we didn't have enough. I had to borrow a few times from family. And pawn stuff, it was, it was just a cycle like that, pawn, take it out, pawn.

It is difficult to capture a comparative picture of the financial impact of subsidized housing for the residents. Some were under-housed prior to living at WestEnd Commons, so were paying lower rents but had insufficient space for their family. Other residents were paying utilities at their previous apartments but are not at WestEnd Commons. Many residents were clear, though, that the subsidized rents at WestEnd Commons had a large financial impact for their families.

### *Food and Nutrition*

Many residents highlighted the ability to afford more and healthier food as an immediate impact of their reduced rents. One resident said of a \$300 difference in monthly rent: "Now I go to Superstore. I have a car, now I am driving. Sometimes I buy for \$300 at once." Another shared: "we buy more fruits and vegetables, yeah that's good".

A resident said that the subsidized rents meant their family no longer used the food bank:

We don't go downstairs anymore for the soup kitchen; we used to go to the soup kitchen all the time for the sandwiches and, like, the emergency food. We would go to the food bank. My son would say, why aren't we going to the food bank? And I'm going, we're actually going to, like, not go to the food bank anymore, we have food in the cupboard now, we have food



A WestEnd Commons apartment, featuring the original church ceiling.

**PHOTO CREDIT:** Finley Photography

in the fridge, we're going to save that for people who actually need it more than us. Like before we were really needy, we're not needy anymore, so we're not going to go.

These findings confirm that reducing a family's housing cost has a positive impact on their food security. The experiences of families at WestEnd Commons demonstrate the clear link between increased housing affordability and increased food security.

One resident indicated that affording good food was still difficult. She said that even with the subsidized rent her budget was still too tight to purchase the nutritious food she wants:

I love organic food but I can't afford it, you know. So I love vegetables, but I can't afford it. I'd rather buy you know those like six for \$1 than you know stuff like that, but you know

it's not easy living on such you know limited budget, no it's not.

### *Skill Swapping*

Residents of WestEnd Commons have begun to engage in a type of barter economy, swapping skills and services with one another with no money exchanged. The intention is to exchange services in order to save money. This has largely been facilitated by the sense of community and trust that is fostered at WestEnd Commons. Residents share children's clothing once their child outgrows the items. Three residents engaged in swapping childcare on a regular basis with a consistent schedule that allowed three parents to continue with their employment. Sporadic childcare swapping also occurs. Residents invite one another over for tea and coffee, and also for meals. A resident shared that she feeds

some of the children in the building when they have not had a full meal.

These anecdotal experiences demonstrate the connection between social capital and economic resources, and how they influence one another. The residents' increased social capital (trust among neighbours) is also increasing their economic resources (mutually beneficial exchange of time and services).

### **Social Impacts on Residents**

It was clear from interviews with the residents that WestEnd Commons' vision of community is already taking shape. While it is too early to know the extent of the impacts of these developing social connections, it is significant that they are happening. Residents are connecting with and supporting one another in ways both large and small. The next section explores the residents' experiences with the social supports and community offered at WestEnd Commons.

#### *Community*

Residents made it clear that there is a tangible and appreciated sense of community in the building:

There's a good, what do I want to say, spirit in the place.

One thing I want to say about the community vibe that I get here most of the time is actually, especially when people are all in the atrium and stuff. It's that feeling that I used to get as a kid when we went to church and like everybody knows each other and they're all like really nice to each other. I really like it, it's good. We're like a club or something.

Residents appreciate getting to know their neighbours through activities and programming, and also through their own connections:

I guess talking to people and, you know, you know your neighbours and stuff, that's kind of more like, like kind of like a community sort of and everybody just kind of sticks together.

I think it's cool having the community here, I mean there are a lot of people who moved in recently in like the couple of months, so I'm still getting to know some of them but we have met quite a few of them. So it's been, it's been really nice considering where I've lived before I've seldom known who my neighbours were.

Sometimes we get together when we have bigger dinners in the building, but we're learning. We're not strangers living in a place right, we're starting to become more of actual real neighbours and, and slowly one day I think we're going to form a, a community, but we're starting there.

Two residents who are newcomers to Canada reflected on how the community at WestEnd Commons reminds them of their home countries:

My last apartment there is nothing like that, just in your home. Yeah, you don't have any connection with anybody. This is different, you know like if I have time myself this is like back home. You can chat with people.

Yeah, I'm happy to be here because we live like in a community, with that sense of community, feeling of community. Of course it is not exactly the way it is supposed to be but there's that sense of belonging. And comparing to western life I feel it is not exactly the way I expected it. Yeah back home in Africa the impression we have of the western countries is that people are so closed, they are closed to themselves, they don't interact, there is this kind of selfishness, no one says hi to the other, everyone is busy in his business and it's very hard to talk to each other. Yeah, that's the feeling that we have back home in Africa.

While twenty of the households at WestEnd Commons are subsidized, six households pay median market rent without subsidies. Some of these households have actually chosen to pay more in rent to live at WestEnd Commons. They have done so because of the intentionally

communal way of living at WestEnd Commons. One resident living in an MMR suite is paying \$300 more in rent at WestEnd Commons than at their previous apartment, but has an additional bedroom. The resident shared why they chose WestEnd Commons:

We have this opportunity to connect with people and, and really I think for us it's very important to live within a community and, and be part of something different. We're always talking about social justice, climate change, all these things, and we talk, talk and talk and this is part of walking the talk I think too. And learn that living in a community doesn't always come easy and it's not all holding hands and being happy a hundred percent of the time. But we're also trying to, we're also trying to, to be connected to people and sort of understand where it's all coming from.

#### *Residents Getting Involved*

The vision of WestEnd Commons was for residents to get involved in regular activities, and eventually start planning activities independently. The Community Connector plans regular events that are well attended and appreciated by the residents:

I went to the community kitchen and I've used food bank. Like I think that helps a lot how it's just like right downstairs. Especially with the two kids and, and it's hard to lug them around like everywhere and have to carry everything back. Yeah. So I'm happy it's just downstairs and, and I'd say community kitchen's pretty good and I wanted to go check out this, the potluck today.

They have lots here, the food bank, they have a church, they have, like it's such a blessing to be here and I'm like, I'm just happy so you know. Other than that there's, I don't know, I like living here.

Yeah because of that community kitchen or communal kitchen now I realize that some

friends who before were not even saying hi to me they have started saying hi to me, when we meet in the hallways they say hi, we miss you and maybe if they didn't see me for a day they say we missed you. So that really has impressed me.

Another resident noted that the potluck was both enjoyable and helped to provide food for her family:

I really like the potluck that we had. We went to it for the first time last month or the beginning of this month and that was really fun. Yeah, we couldn't bring anything 'cause this month we have been having a lot of trouble with, with food and money and stuff. We're still kind of getting on our feet.

As described above, one way WestEnd Commons establishes a feeling of community is through supportive policies. Residents understand that WestEnd Commons manages its property differently, and it affects how involved they feel in their apartment block. One resident said:

Other housing units — keep to yourself, no loud noises after 11:00, the police will be called in, you'll get four warnings, after the fifth or whatever you're out. You know this is it, either you behave yourself or you're out. But I don't feel like that, you know on those terms here. You know keep your place clean and you know you feel blessed. And you're involved, it's a good feeling.

Residents have begun to plan regular events for one another based on their interests and needs. One resident started a popular family movie night for residents of the building, which was mentioned by many in their interviews as a positive part of living in the building.

Yeah, what has impressed me and touched me a lot here is what we call movie night. So at night they show us movies and we all come, all the tenants and their children, their families will come together at one place to watch a movie and

we feel like we are in the community, we belong to the community.

Since the time of the interviews for this report, more resident involvement has occurred. A notable example is when residents worked together to address their mutual challenge of finding affordable childcare. As mentioned above, three parents at WestEnd Commons had a temporary arrangement with one another to exchange childcare. Through polling other residents, they identified that access to affordable childcare was an issue that many residents were experiencing. Two residents, Drabble as the Community Connector and two CLC members (including myself) gathered to discuss how WestEnd Commons could assist with this need. Through a series of meetings, the group connected with the West Central Women's Resource Centre to discuss the possibility of jointly addressing affordable childcare in the West Central neighbourhood. West Central Women's Resource Centre, which has more child care connections and has the benefit of being an established organization, is now in the planning stages to make this idea a reality. WestEnd Commons will be involved in the planning and will receive a select number of priority spots in the childcare centre. This is community development in action — residents identifying a need, planting the seed, partnering with local organizations, and working together to make it happen.

### *Mental Health and Addictions*

Improved mental health is an impact of the communal nature of WestEnd Commons that a number of residents expressed. Residents described how living in community helped them to mitigate their mental health challenges, and at times improve them:

Because I'm scared people will judge me for the things that I have to deal with, but I don't think that they would, especially some of our neighbours that we know. I don't really know

them that well but I saw that one neighbour was in, in the paper or something and he talked about having anxiety and depression and stuff and we never talk about it together or anything but we always sort of are in the same elevator together and we always say hi and everything. So I feel like way more relaxed around them just knowing there's somebody else there, so that's interesting.

Well it's more just the community, you know they're very friendly and like with my anxiety if I don't see friendly I just get all freaked out and I just keep on walking by right and I never say hi to these people. I'll look down and whatnot, but people saying hi and I'm like hi (chuckle). How are you today, whereas before I wouldn't have done that.

I've got also avoidance patterns. I guess it just doesn't really work too well when you avoid a lot of things, so that's come a long way even in this building itself, 'cause I can't avoid everybody. Especially when they're saying hi, how was your day. Well I guess I'll sit here and I'll chit chat.

A resident described the positive effect that living in community at WestEnd Commons has on their addiction:

So that's a miracle, to move to a place here which is really far better than moving into say a senior housing project or an isolated apartment. Here there is built in community as you know. Lots of things going on. It connects me with people and there's things to do. And one of the dangers if you have an addiction is isolation and, and withdrawal. When I say that it's a miracle that I'm here, part of the miracle is that I'm in a community which offers me something to stay away from isolation and stay away from drugs and its, it feels like coming home here to me.

Housing is a social determinant of health. Residents are experiencing tangible and immediate positive health impacts from living in an

affordable housing complex that prioritizes social inclusion.

#### *Assistance in Times of Crises and Need*

A significant impact of the community and support fostered at WestEnd Commons is how, within the first few months of living together, the residents have banded together on a number of occasions and assisted one another in times of need and crises. This was the vision of those who created WestEnd Commons, and it is already bearing fruit.

Assisting one another with childcare is a very tangible and appreciated form of mutual support regularly occurring at WestEnd Commons. One resident, a single parent with a young child, has become acquainted with her neighbour. The parent said: “my neighbour, sometimes my neighbour will come, okay go to sleep, you know she will see me, she’s like you look horrible, go and sleep. I’ll watch [your child].” The parent described how she does not have family in Winnipeg to help her with her young child. She is able to receive support and catch up on sleep because her neighbour will take her child for a few hours.

Another parent described how her neighbour looked after her children while she was dealing with a family crisis:

When my partner’s dad had passed away, [my neighbour] was there like to watch the kids. It was pretty helpful. And I just told her if she ever needs help I’m always home, so she can just come and knock on my door and I’ll be there. It feels different [than my previous apartment] ‘cause like this one I know it’s family-oriented. Because I know I’m kind of leery about like who I trust with my kids.

A resident who does not have family in Winnipeg described the importance of having childcare support from other residents:

It’s a huge help to not be a complete stranger on the street, because I had childcare issues last

week, right? If I was just in a regular apartment building I would have just been super stressed and have to cancel those important meetings that I had to be at and say I’m sorry, but I can’t show up because I don’t have a babysitter. And so I think, I know that one way or another I can come to my neighbours and, and have them help me and then we help them too.

The residents clearly care about each others’ children and keep an eye out for one another. One resident recalled how her family’s help was sought when a boy’s brother was not coming home from hockey practice and their mother was away at work:

One day one of [the neighbour boys] wasn’t coming back from school from hockey practice and it was the evening in winter, so the older brother was worried and then he came here and my husband went with him to drive around the streets until they found him.

Recently, residents worked together to address another child safety issue at WestEnd Commons. Drabble said:

There was a bit of an incident here one evening. It was an issue around the safety of a child and the parents not being present. The issue came to [the tenants’] attention and they got together as a group and discussed it and problem-solved and totally dealt with the situation on their own. The kid was taken care of for the night by another tenant. It was an unfortunate situation but I think it was a really good example of the kind of community that exists here and the care that exists for each others’ kids.

Within the first year of WestEnd Commons’ existence, two residents passed away. One person passed away from cancer and another from a traffic collision. Both deaths affected many of the residents deeply and they processed their grief and shock in community with one another. WestEnd Commons organized a small service for

## A Resident's Story

As a single low-income mother, I know the struggle of living in cramped quarters. I had injured my back in 2008, I lost my job, having little to no money I was constantly wondering where the money would come from to feed my son and worried that we would end up homeless with nowhere to live. At first we lived with a friend in a tiny overcrowded one-bedroom apartment. We slept in the bedroom and my friend slept in the living room, but we had to act like ghosts when inspection time came around or risk eviction for us all. After finding volunteer work at my son's school and at the West Central Women's Resource Centre, I was earning honorariums, we were able to get our own place but it was only in a one-bedroom apartment. So I slept in the living room while my son had the bedroom. Having no privacy for over three years took its toll on me, leaving me stressed out but it was all we could afford at that time. Currently we are living in subsidized housing at the WestEnd Commons. It is a unique and fantastic community to live in; we plan community events, meals, outings, movies and get togethers. Every day we are so grateful we were accepted into this living space. We feel so safe and secure there. I have my own room, so does my son. We enjoy finally having our own space back. We even have a little extra money leftover at the end of the month for special treats. Something we couldn't afford before was healthier options at the grocery store, and entertainment such as movies, outings of our own and shows. Now we can do that. The need for low income or subsidized housing is so great in this city, but the availability for it is so small. Everybody deserves to live somewhere affordable and within their means.

**Note:** A portion of a speech delivered by a WestEnd Commons resident at the Housing 4 All rally in Winnipeg on April 9, 2016

each resident in order to give the community the chance to collectively remember and grieve. The community gathered to share stories about the people who passed away, to cry with each other, to share pictures, and to reflect on what they learned from those who died. I attended one of the services and it was a moving experience. It was clear that the tenants cared for each other almost as family. In a way, it felt like these grieving experiences cemented the residents together as a community who were sharing sorrows and difficulties together.

Residents were clear that, even within a few months at WestEnd Commons, they experienced significant social and economic impacts. A West-End Commons resident described this in full at the Housing 4 All rally on the steps of Manitoba's Legislature. The resident's words, in Box 4, sum up the challenges of lacking appropriate and affordable housing, as well as the impacts of finally attaining it at WestEnd Commons.

## Room for Improvement

Overall, the residents of WestEnd Commons expressed satisfaction with their new homes. Positive impacts, including increased economic and social inclusion, were evident even within the first few months of their tenancy. There are still areas for improvement, however, as outlined below.

### *Deeper Community*

While community is forming and relationships are being built at WestEnd Commons, one resident expressed a desire for something greater still. The resident discussed the racial divisions apparent at WestEnd Commons, and her vision for how to connect across these differences:

I hope there's more dialogue and collaboration between the people that are First Nations that are living in the building and the non-First Nations. There's still a lot of mistrust I think and lots of differences. So for people that are newcomers and any other people that are in

the building it's way easier to connect, people participate more, come and then there's, there's dialogue happening. So I feel like, I hope that there's, there's more dialogue and people can start letting go of those assumptions and then, maybe we can be more of a support to those families if they're open to have us in their lives.

The same resident hopes that in the future the residents themselves feel comfortable enough to naturally plan and engage in community, without the assistance of the Community Connector:

So that's what I'm really hoping and then we can do things together, like we're starting to do these things with support of an extra person, but I'm hoping that these potluck things can become more of a natural thing like people you know share the ideas, okay share the ideas and, and come together.

#### *Additional Programming*

A small number of residents requested that WestEnd Commons host additional programming within the building. A parenting program was requested, as was children's art programming. It is worth noting that both of these programming requests have since been fulfilled. A number of residents brought their request of a parenting program to Drabble, who subsequently obtained funding and put the program in place, and a resident with skills in arts programming volunteered to run a weekly children's art club.

#### *Safety*

Safety is key for families when assessing the appropriateness of housing for them and their children. The safety of residents' previous accommodations was discussed above. The majority of residents do find WestEnd Commons safer for their families than their previous accommodations. They still indicated clear room for improvement, as there had been some incidents that had made residents uncomfortable and unsure.

A number of residents feel that the WestEnd Commons building is safe, particularly when compared with residents' previous accommodations.

I think the safety is pretty good. It's, it's really, really good. I feel more happier, more relaxed.

Inside of the building I feel really safe.

Residents were particularly aware of the effects of a safer environment on their children. They shared stories of the differences between their previous accommodations and WestEnd Commons:

This place helps a lot. It's just that, it's very peaceful here. You don't hear all that, like that stuff outside that we used to always hear, like too much, too much of that. It rubs off on you I guess. Yeah, [my kids] can feel it, they see it, they don't like it. It's a real good change right here coming into a safe building. Never been in a building like this ever. The security, the cameras, it's so clean, everything is brand new. Just never been in a building like that ever in my life, neither have my kids.

In my old place I had to sleep with my lights on, like I was always scared to sleep. Yeah, it was just scary and like here I sleep with all my lights off. Like, you know, it's just comfy, comforting right. And [my son] is like yay, I can sleep in my own room, I'm a big boy, 'cause he doesn't care right, he had his own room before at our other place but he just always slept with me 'cause he was always scared right 'cause there was just so much noise and like everything was just loud over there and just like you never knew like if they were going to fight like the upstairs people. So here it's just yeah. I like it here.

Some residents said that they generally feel safe in the building, but there are still incidents that occur that make the residents feel unsafe:

I think in terms of safety within the building I feel very safe. I think yeah for the most part trust the neighbours and no big deal. We had a

couple of instances where people in the winter when it was really cold they were sleeping in the entrance. And some of them were intoxicated and sleeping on the floor, so I mean that makes people feel unsafe I feel.

It's better here [than my previous place], but recently there's been some incidents that we need to deal with. So I mean I think in any building anywhere there will be incidents right. There will be people, unwanted people in your building.

Residents had mixed feelings around neighbourhood safety, and they strongly fell along gendered lines. Women residents had more concerns about neighbourhood safety than men:

Sometimes I feel unsafe because it's really dark at night 'cause I park back there next to the, at the back of the building and there's not enough light so.

I don't know about comfort in the neighbourhood at the moment. The building is a safe place, but out there.

In the neighbourhood I don't feel safe, especially after a certain time of day, I'd say about 6, 7 o'clock. I always get [my husband] to go out and get anything after that time because I don't feel safe, especially, if we were together it would be fine, I can't walk out alone in these streets by myself after that time.

Usually I don't go out by myself. I mean if you just you want to go for a walk, I just call somebody just to be with me you know. Like sometimes if I just want to go to Safeway. I mean I have just to go in the morning; I can't go in the evening. You know you never know what's going to happen for my kids.

Men tended to feel safer in the neighbourhood:

This is a rough, this is where the heart of gangland in Winnipeg, Ellice and Sargent. It doesn't worry me a bit. I think a neighbourhood can be as safe or as unsafe as you want it to be.

## Residents' Concerns with the WestEnd Commons Building

- The lack of sound proofing in the building. Residents feel a lack of privacy because of this; expressed frustration with the noise of children running in building; conflict between residents occurs because of noise issues.
- The building is too hot, both the apartments and the stairwells; some residents requested air conditioning units.
- Some apartments are too small, with few windows that are also too small.
- Some residents experienced issues with S.A.M. Management dealing with maintenance in a timely manner.
- One resident requested more parking spaces.
- One resident complained of mice in their apartment.
- One resident disliked WestEnd Commons' 'no animals' policy.

And it's your attitude that makes it unsafe. I don't consider this an unsafe neighbourhood. I fit right in because I've been, I've walked in Winnipeg's netherworld for ten years and so I understand.

I am quite comfortable in this neighbourhood. I can look intimidating if I want to, so I'm not afraid of just being chosen as like somebody who would be considered an easy target.

### *Concerns With the Building*

While residents were overwhelmingly positive about the community focus of WestEnd Commons, issues with the building itself hampered this positivity. Box 5 describes the residents' concerns with WestEnd Commons regarding the physical building, which affects how they experience their homes. Retrofitting a historic building comes with its challenges and the residents are experiencing these daily. The issue of noise in the building was brought up the most, as the walls are thin and people live in close quarters.

*Continued Future at WestEnd Commons*

Despite these issues, residents are largely planning on remaining at WestEnd Commons. Of the eighteen households interviewed, thirteen (72 percent) indicated that they intend to live at WestEnd

Commons at least for the next three years. Three households (17 percent) were unsure, and two households (11 percent) were planning on leaving. Their reasons were to pursue further education in another province and to purchase a home.

# Social and Affordable Housing with Supports Requires Public Investment

In its first year, WestEnd Commons demonstrated that social and affordable housing with supports strengthens families' economic and social inclusion in society. Families had more money in their pockets, which resulted in reduced food bank usage, more nutritious food in their cupboards, and a bit of room for extras at the end of the month. Residents also experienced support and social inclusion, which gave them a deeper sense of place, strengthened mental health, expanded support networks, involvement in planning and providing programming with fellow residents, and peer support in times of need.

These early impacts indicate that continued public investment in housing with supports is worth it — for low-income families and for all Manitobans. Public investment in housing targets multiple social policy objectives. “Housing fits in the middle of everything. It is physical design, it is community economic development, it is social development, it is important to health and educational outcomes, it can be a poverty reduction tool, and it is investment, a wealth creator and a generator of economic development. It is both an individual and public good” (Modified from D. Myers, as cited in Carter, 2009, p. 8). Social and affordable hous-

ing is a long-term mechanism for providing families with multiple in-house supports and services, increasing their economic and social inclusion in society.

Manitoba's NDP government demonstrated a commitment to public investment in social and affordable housing that built 2000 new units since 2009. The Liberal federal government has pledged to invest in social and affordable housing. The 2016 federal budget allocated \$2.3 billion in two years for social and affordable housing, doubling previous investments through the Investment in Affordable Housing fund. This investment will provide a much-needed shot in the arm to a fledgling sector, but a committed provincial partner is needed to make a sustainable long-term difference. It will be critical to ensure that the newly elected Progressive Conservative government does not use renewed federal involvement in the housing sector to abdicate its responsibilities for continued investment. Supportive housing complexes such as WestEnd Commons demonstrate the need for the provincial government to continue its role as an active partner in providing social and affordable housing to Manitobans living on limited incomes. In addition to providing reduced

rents, the provincial government must prioritize investment in the provision of supports tied to low-cost housing. Social and affordable housing with supports attached ensures that families experience greater economic and social inclusion, benefiting us all.

## References

- Brandon, J. 2014. *Winnipeg and Manitoba Housing Data*. Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- Brandon, J. 2015a. *Winnipeg and Manitoba Housing Data 2015*. Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba.
- Brandon, J. 2015b. The More Things Change: Low-income housing in Winnipeg today. In Brandon, J. & Silver, J. (eds). *Poor Housing: A Silent Crisis*. Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing.
- Brandon, J. 2015c. Housing and Health in Manitoba. In Fernandez, L., MacKinnon, S. & Silver, J. (eds). *The Social Determinants of Health in Manitoba*.
- Brandon, J., & Silver, J. 2015. Poor Housing Matters. In Brandon, J. & Silver, J. (eds). *Poor Housing: A Silent Crisis*. Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing.
- Carter, T. 2009. *Housing for Manitobans: A Long-Term Plan*. Winnipeg: Government of Manitoba, Department of Housing and Community Development. Accessed at [gov.mb.ca/housing/pubs/tom\\_carter\\_report.pdf](http://gov.mb.ca/housing/pubs/tom_carter_report.pdf).
- Chisholm, S. 2003. Affordable Housing in Canada's Urban Communities: A literature review. CMHC. Accessed at [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2011/schl-cmhc/nh18-1/NH18-1-2-2003-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2011/schl-cmhc/nh18-1/NH18-1-2-2003-eng.pdf).
- Cooper, S. 2013. *It's Getting Great: Government investment in Gilbert Park and Lord Selkirk Park*. Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba.
- Cooper, S. 2015. A Terrific Loss: The end of social housing operating agreements. In Brandon, J. & Silver, J. (eds). *Poor Housing: A Silent Crisis*. Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing.
- Cooper, S. & Skelton, I. 2015. *Addressing Core Housing Need in Canada*. Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba.
- Gaetz, S. 2010. The Struggle to End Homelessness in Canada: How we created the crisis, and how we can end it. *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal*, 3, 21–26.
- Gaetz, S., Gulliver, T. & Richter, T. 2014. *The State of Homelessness in Canada: 2014*. Toronto: The Homeless Hub Press.
- Hurtig, M. 2000. *Pay the Rent or Feed the Kids: The tragedy and disgrace of poverty in Canada*. McLelland and Stewart.

- Jantz, A. 2013. Living on Common Ground: West End project offers shared housing. *Winnipeg Free Press*. April 28.
- Klassen, J. 2015. A Leap of Faith: The case of WestEnd Commons. In Brandon, J. & Silver, J. (eds). *Poor Housing: A Silent Crisis*. Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing.
- May, J. 2007. *Social Lives in Social Housing: Resident connections to social services*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- Pomeroy, S. 2015. Built to Last: Strengthening the foundations of housing in Canada. *Prepared for the Canadian Foundation of Municipalities*. Accessed at [https://www.fcm.ca/Documents/reports/FCM/Built\\_to\\_Last\\_Strengthening\\_the\\_foundations\\_of\\_housing\\_in\\_Canada\\_EN.pdf](https://www.fcm.ca/Documents/reports/FCM/Built_to_Last_Strengthening_the_foundations_of_housing_in_Canada_EN.pdf).
- Smirl, E. 2015. Shifting the Tables: From food insecurity to food sovereignty in Manitoba. In Fernandez, L., MacKinnon, S. & Silver, J. (eds). *The Social Determinants of Health in Manitoba*.
- Van Katwyk, T. & Klassen, J. Forthcoming. Belonging and Recognition: Extending the Poverty and Social Inclusion Link.





**CCPA**

CANADIAN CENTRE  
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
MANITOBA OFFICE

Unit 205 – 765 Main St., Winnipeg, MB R2W 3N5  
TEL 204-927-3200 FAX 204-927-3201  
EMAIL [ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca](mailto:ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca)  
WEBSITE [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca)