

From: Dispossessed Disabled Artists Demanding Housing (DDADH)
<http://claudewittmann.ca/DDADH/ddadh.html>

To:
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We are a group of 5 Toronto artists living with invisible disability who are making gestures to pro-actively address our housing precariousness and make visible some of the incredibly numerous barriers we encounter when at the border of homelessness, which is not rare for our group. This letter is a first step.

With this letter, we request that you set up a process to include a disability justice lens into Toronto's rent-geared-to-income and affordable housing and start with adding disabled individuals in the City's Local Rules for priority access to housing.

The allocation of rent-geared-to-income housing/RGI has moved from the principle of a maximum of 3 offers to a "choice-based system". This system comes with very limited information about the choices. It does not allow applicants to see where they will live before applying, while knowing that transfers are not allowed anymore in the main RGI provider, Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC)'s buildings, unless one can show and document a very dire medical emergency or a very severe need for a human-rights based "accommodation".

What is called "affordable" housing, while in itself unaffordable to us, is going to be administrated under a new definition that does not seem to be reaching our population and it is going to be more centrally and potentially more easily accessed but, from our population, only by those who qualify for housing allowances. This is unfair.

Housing allowances, despite being desperately needed in Toronto's housing landscape, are a very sad housing tool that keeps tenants like us in housing that they can't afford on their own and sometimes, push them into food and basic needs insecurity. We know that housing allowances have been on review and we have read the model that the 17 Paton Road Tenants submitted to Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA) when the review started in September 2020, but we are not aware of any improvements since. What is happening? Also, has the City committed to continue funding the Toronto Transitional Housing Allowance Program (TTHAP) after the Province stops paying for it?

Finally, social assistance is currently taking a sharp turn towards business models that have proven detrimental for persons with disability in the UK. A new stream of "life stabilization" is introduced in which housing services will play a fundamental role and housing workers and managers will face even more closely the reality that "stabilizing" our lives at the current social assistance rates is impossible. How will you help us find housing? How will you respect our right to an adequate standard of living and our right to self-determination while under immense pressure?

The average income of a tenant in Toronto's social housing is \$1,690/month when indexed to 2022 real terms. Our income is only in very rare occasions that high. If the support from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) had been regularly indexed to inflation, those of us on ODSP would now receive \$1,620/month. This would not cover much more than Toronto's Average Market Rent (AMR) of \$1,446/month for a one bedroom unit at the moment, but it would already be better than the current rate of \$1,169/month, or even the \$1,227.45/month that the recent 5% increase will bring to us. Please remember too that when we earn more than \$200, 50% goes back to ODSP. If we earn \$1,000, we can only keep \$600.

Our rents are more than 70% of our income. We are in way more than what the National Housing Strategy defines as "severe housing need". In fact, our incomes are so low and there is still so much stigma attached to disability and ODSP that private landlords do not shy away from bluntly discriminating against us. This also has happened, and maybe even more so when we contact potential landlords with in our hands only the non-committal promise by the City of a housing allowance.

We also regularly walk into other barriers. Our income fluctuates in often stressful ways, partly because of how the arts' funding systems work, but also because, despite much efforts, Toronto's arts' scene is still only embryonically accessible. For example, it is still rare that events, or calls for submission are designed with our demographic in mind and it is also rare that accommodating us and our audiences would be fairly funded. In these conditions, the stress to adapt is on our shoulders and it is not always possible for us to add this stress to our difference or already challenged health and limited energy. More often than we would like, we have to let opportunities pass to avoid a loss

of functionality and a loss of respect from our communities.

As far as we know, priority access to RGI housing has been given in Toronto to the following few target groups:

- individuals qualifying for the provincially defined "special priority" (SP):
 - survivors of family/domestic abuse and of human trafficking
- individuals falling into the Toronto specific "local priority rules":
 - Terminally ill applicants who have less than two years to live
 - Tenants living in subsidized units that are larger than the units they qualify for (internal transfer for existing RGI tenants only)
 - Applicants experiencing homelessness, and living in a shelter or on the streets (Applicants must provide a letter from the shelter to verify their stay, or a letter from a community agency to verify their living circumstances. The letter must use the shelter or agency's official letterhead and be submitted with the applicant's RGI application.)
 - Separated families who have children in the care of the Children's Aid
 - Youth who are 16 or 17 years old at the time of applying for subsidized housing.

At the provincial and federal levels however, there has been a recognition of our need for facilitated access.

The Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI) said that "all affordable units must be targeted to people and populations who are vulnerable, especially people experiencing or at risk of homelessness". RHI added that, as defined in "the National Housing Strategy, priority vulnerable groups [...] include: * Homeless people or those at risk of homelessness * Women and their children fleeing domestic violence * Black Canadians * Indigenous peoples * Racialized groups * Seniors * Young adults * People with disabilities * People dealing with mental health and addiction issues * Veterans * LGBTQ2+ * Recent immigrants or refugees".

The provincial guidelines for the Canada-Ontario-Housing Benefit (COHB) also recognized us as a primary priority group: "The COHB program is primarily intended to support vulnerable individuals and households in housing need. The following vulnerable populations under the National Housing Strategy will have priority for COHB support: * Survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking; * Persons experiencing or at-risk of homelessness; * Indigenous persons; * Seniors; and * People with disabilities."

We have noticed that Toronto's COHB 2022 program is offering the benefit to persons with disabilities who require modified units. Of course, this is an encouraging step for the disability community in Toronto.

But COHB comes with the same disadvantages as housing allowances, a 2029 end date for federal funding, and on top, it requires applicants to leave the Centralized Waiting List and thus relinquish their only hope for true long-term housing security.

The restriction of eligibility to individuals requiring modified units is also bad news for us. We are not naive and we can already feel the efforts we would have to make to validate our invisible disability as a condition that requires a modified unit. Will you give COHB to a disabled individual who suffers from sensory hypersensitivity? Will you give COHB to a disabled individual who lost most of their ability to work during a housing crisis and can't afford rent anymore? Will you give COHB to somebody who suffers severe insomnia? Will you give COHB to an individual who is suffering the exhausting and health-damaging trauma of regular housing insecurity because of being on ODSP and being discriminated?

A lot of artists have already had to move out of Toronto. Should all disabled artists leave?

We think that it is time for Toronto to update its understanding of disability, to add a disability justice lens to its housing strategies and give all disabled people priority access.

If you are interested in collaborating with us on our requests, please contact us.

Sincerely,

Dispossessed Disabled Artists Demanding Housing (DDADH)

Contact: Leon Brian McCurdy, raised_brow@hotmail.com