

# 2016

## ONPHA Conference and Trade Show

### 504

## How to support challenging tenants

Sharing what we have learned at the Rainy River District Women's  
Shelter of Hope

ONPhA



# Overview of our organization

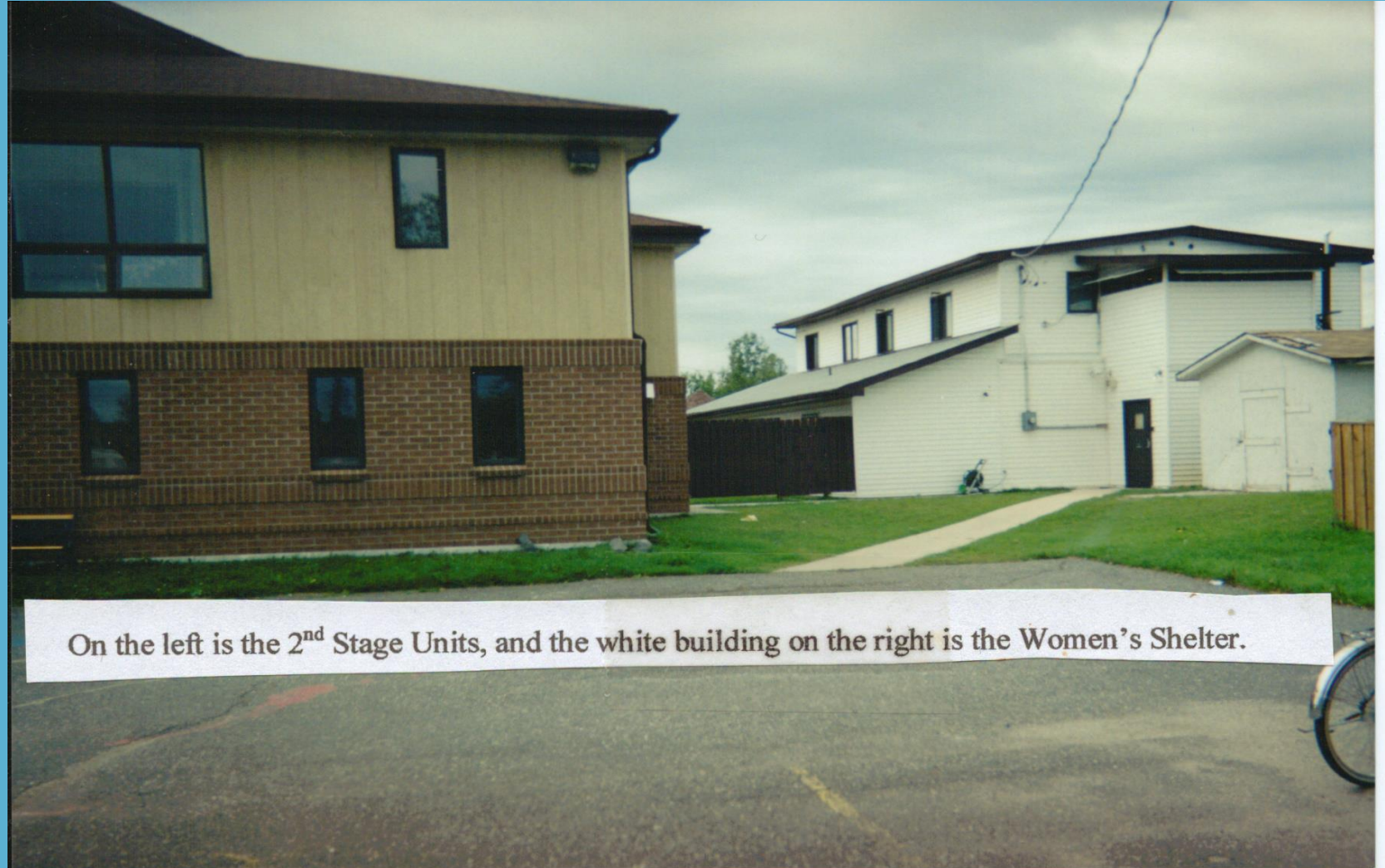
We operate:

- 10-bed women's emergency shelter
- 10-unit 2<sup>nd</sup> stage apartment building
- Staffing: no dedicated staffing in housing, supported at 1:16 ration staff/tenant through other programs
- Both buildings are on the same property and share community space.
- Our office is located in the apartment building, giving tenants easy access to us for assistance.



# Overview of organization

- Located in small town – population 3,000 but serve a geographic area of 20,000 including ten First Nations communities.
- Very limited resources – had to adapt to provide services effectively.
- Housing choices are very limited in our area.





# Who are our tenants?

Women (and their children) who:

- may be fleeing abuse and may have a history of trauma
- may be transitioning from the shelter
- may have a history of chronic homelessness and poverty
- are in need of safety and stability
- may have addiction and/or mental health issues
- need support and a sense of belonging
- are unique individuals with complex needs



# Services provided (the basics)

- Rent is geared to income, most of our tenants are on social assistance
- Rent is direct deposit to avoid arrears
- Utilities are included in the rent in 2<sup>nd</sup> Stage
- All apartments are fully furnished
- Free laundry on site
- Free parking
- Free Wi-Fi, phone and cable TV in the common lounge



# Services provided (building community)

- Assist tenant obtain donated household items for her home
- Gazebo, BBQ, bikes, outside toys and playground equipment inside safe, fenced area
- Free community garden in raised garden boxes on site in fenced area: seeds, plants, tools available. Skills taught.
- On site trauma therapy/counsellor/support staff on site 9-5, Monday –Friday
- Shelter staff available to assist 24/7 in emergency situations or as a 'walk-in'



# Services provided (giving support)

- Care packages of food and donations to any woman in need
- Supportive maintenance worker on site daily
- Large donations shed on site with household items, furniture, baby items, bedding
- Weekly non mandatory support groups held in the lounge
- Advocacy provided as requested
- Accompaniment to appointments provided as requested
- Life skills training provided as requested



# Children's services

- Free childcare on site for women during appointments or meetings
- Children's playroom in shelter and 2<sup>nd</sup> stage housing
- Programming for children who have witnessed violence available in a Camp setting once per annum





# Challenges to overcome

This session should be titled, “Working With Challenging Situations” instead of “Working With Challenging Tenants”

It is the situation, and not the tenant, that is the actual challenge.



# Challenges to overcome

Due to limited resources, creativity, open-mindedness, and committed staff are necessary to address these issues successfully.

Networking with other helping professions is also necessary as no one can possibly do it all.

The greatest disservice we can do to a tenant is to alienate them from other helpers.

We work to break down siloes, and create a sense of community for the tenant.



# Alcohol and other drugs

- Discuss possible negative outcomes if behaviour associated with drug or alcohol use escalates – e.g. loss of job, eviction, etc.
- Help her develop an awareness of the natural consequences of her behaviour. Do this with a non-judgmental attitude.
- Ensure her space is safe. Garbage can in room for vomit. Clean out toilets when plugged from vomit and/or feces.



# Alcohol and other drugs

- Gently advise her how her behaviour might be negatively affecting other tenants who are trying to abstain from use of drugs or alcohol.
- Provide in-house support group meeting that addresses addictions.
- Provide transportation to treatment program, if she decides there is a problem, and chooses to attend a residential treatment program. Long-term goal.





# Mental health issues

- If tenant's behaviour is distressing to other tenants, speak to her about it directly, respectfully, and honestly. Explain that you are concerned, and specifically how her behaviour is problematic.
- Ask about whether or not there has been a diagnosis of mental illness and if so, what medications were prescribed, and are those medications being taken in accordance with the practitioner's advice. If not, or if medication is outdated, refer to physician.



# Mental health issues

- If the tenant is resistant, call in a mental health expert, if necessary, to provide an overview to the people in the building.
- Address the behaviour as opposed to the disease and avoid using labels.
- “Treat her like you would anyone else.”



# Lounge and therapy

Recognize that most people we work with require trauma-informed services.

People cope in many ways following trauma.



# Elderly

- Maintain barrier-free hallways and common areas.
- Reserve ground floor units whenever possible for this demographic.
- Bring in speakers from an elder's organization/refer to community programs.





# Elderly

- Partner with Home Support, Meals on Wheels, CCAC, etc. and ensure that service providers feel welcome coming into your building.
- During support groups, ensure that it is sensitive to the specific needs of the elderly – e.g. speak up if someone has a hearing impairment or provide only food that is tolerated well by all attendees.
- Use creativity – e.g. One tenant had a desire for powder on her back after her shower, so we always ensured we had powder available for back rubs!



# Poverty is the number one predictor of ill-health

- Assess her financial situation with the tenant, assist with budgeting.
- Make tenant aware of free resources/programs available to them in our community.
- Do her previous year's income tax for her to get benefits.



# Poverty is the number one predictor of ill-health

- Review previous tax returns for unclaimed benefits.
- Provide referrals to local food banks, and transportation if necessary.
- Help her access donations or use social media to request specific items.



# Poverty

- Ask for free passes to social events .
- Partner with local library for free internet access for tenants, book and movie rentals, and inclusion in events – again, also provide transportation if necessary.
- Meet with local employers and encourage them to hire your tenants!
- Link tenants with funding sources for entrepreneurs.
- Provide a community garden.





# Poverty

- Provide a free phone in common area for local calls.
- Speak to cable provider for free service for tenants or negotiate a reduced rate.
- Provide free parking and laundry if possible.
- Ask for donations of wild game confiscated by game and wildlife authorities, and provide to tenants. (We store moose meat in a big freezer for the tenants and community women)



# Hoarding

- Avoid judgment. This is considered a mental health matter.
- Bring in someone with authority – a fire or building inspector to advise the tenant that the unit **MUST** be cleaned up.
- A dead-line for the clean-up must be determined in consultation with the authority figure you have brought in, and have that person advise the tenant. You then remain on good terms with the tenant.
- Then provide assistance – bring in boxes and helpers.
- Provide free garbage runs for them as the cleaning is completed.



# Hoarding (Cont'd.)

- If there is resistance, remind the tenant about the initial problem
  - “We have got to get this done by... or you might have to be evicted.”
- Talk about the infestation of bugs or critters and what a health concern that is for everyone, including the other tenants.
- This is not about a sterile environment, but a “good enough” clean-up. There will likely be back-sliding. Remind the tenant that the inspector will be back on a regular basis, and continue to monitor the situation.



# Landlord and Tenant Board

- There are circumstances where, despite your best efforts, an eviction is warranted.
- The *Residential Tenancies Act, 2006* requires a rather lengthy process if the tenant resists moving on.



# Landlord and Tenant Board

- Applying for an Order under Section 9(2) could exempt your organization from this process, under the following circumstances:
  - If your organization is a registered charitable institution – subsection 5(e)
  - If the living arrangement is short-term – subsection 5(f)
  - If the living environment is considered rehabilitative or therapeutic – subsection 5(k)



# Conclusion

- Since August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007, when we obtained an Order that the Act does not apply, we have had no difficult evictions!
- Tenants are more inclined to work with us to resolve issues as they arise, resulting in the situations being resolved amicably.
- Respect, dignity for all, and a non-judgmental, caring attitude makes all the difference.
- Good luck in your work, and providing people with one of their most basic but important needs – safe and affordable housing!

