

RentSafe in Owen Sound Roundtable

October 25, 2019
Owen Sound, Ontario



Meeting Summary

The **RentSafe in Owen Sound Roundtable**, held at the Grey Bruce Health Unit on October 25, 2019, marked the culmination of three years of work of a team of local community members and researchers from the Centre for Environmental Health Equity (CEHE), Queen's University. The **RentSafe EquIP (Equity-focused Intersectoral Practice)** research project¹ brought together community leaders, health and social service providers, tenants and housing providers to discuss and explore what is needed to build stronger intersectoral action on housing and health equity in Owen Sound.

The Roundtable directly followed a presentation of the RentSafe EquIP research findings to the **Healthy Communities Partnership** breakfast meeting. The very large turnout for the breakfast briefing, with more than 50 people in attendance, suggests a high level of interest and concern about housing issues in the community. Many of those who attended the breakfast meeting stayed for the Roundtable (see list of Roundtable participants, Annex 1).



RentSafe EquIP research team provides briefing at the Healthy Communities Partnership breakfast meeting, October 25, 2019

Photo credit: C. Sanchez-Pimienta

The purpose of the Roundtable was to reflect on what was learned through the research and discuss a path forward, building on the relationships, ideas, and momentum that had been generated. A group of

women from M'Wikwedong Indigenous Friendship Centre opened the meeting in a good way with drumming, smudging and a tobacco offering. Erica Phipps, CEHE, provided a brief overview of the research activities, which included a series of Learning Exchanges and a multi-day Intersectoral Retreat. In addition to shedding light on the experiences and challenges associated with unhealthy rental housing conditions in the community, the research affirmed the value of investing in human relationships as a means of strengthening intersectoral response to housing concerns. The research is summarized in a final report, launched at the Roundtable, entitled [We Are All Neighbours](#).²

Following the introductory remarks, Roundtable participants were invited to share brief updates on ongoing or upcoming work related to promoting healthier, safer and more affordable housing. These included the innovative Giiwe intersectoral table on housing and homelessness led by M'Wikwedong,

¹ For more on the RentSafe EquIP research, visit: <https://rentsafe.ca/owen-sound/>

² Available at: https://rentsafecanada.files.wordpress.com/2019/11/rentsafe-in-owen-sound_final-report.pdf



RentSafe in Owen Sound Roundtable, October 25, 2019

Photo credit: C. Sanchez-Pimienta

the recent attainment of funds to hire two housing outreach workers at the Southwest Ontario Aboriginal Health Access Centre (SOAHAC), Grey County Housing building 90 units for Owen Sound, work to improve by-law/property standards related to housing conditions, and various other advocacy and program initiatives. The number and breadth of activities reported on by participants suggest a strong and growing commitment to address housing concerns in Owen Sound and Grey-Bruce.

Updates were also provided on a number of relevant initiatives at the provincial level. Kathleen Cooper, Canadian Environmental Law Association, and Seana Moorhead, Grey-Bruce Community Legal Clinic, provided a brief overview of key challenges and opportunities within the current legal and policy framework around housing. Participants also learned about resources that are available for tenants and housing providers to address [mould](#)³ and [bedbugs](#).⁴ Bob Hart, RentSafe Project Team, and Andrew Barton, GBHU, updated participants on an expanding cross-sectoral collaboration between public health inspectors and municipal by-law/property standards officers. Helen Doyle, Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA), reported on a recent OPHA webinar series that featured both the [province-wide RentSafe project](#) (www.RentSafe.ca) and the Owen Sound RentSafe EquiP research.

Topics discussed during the Roundtable included thinking about housing as a human right, and the need to consider both 'carrots' (e.g., access to funds for renovations) and 'sticks' (e.g., regulatory standards) in order to improve housing conditions. Participants engaged in a lively discussion of the pros and cons of moving to a more proactive system to ensure safe and healthy conditions in rental housing, to replace the current reactive system that relies primarily on tenant complaints.



Roundtable participants share updates

Photo credit: C. Sanchez-Pimienta

³ Available at: <https://rentsafe.ca/2019/06/26/new-resources-on-mould-and-health-for-physicians-and-their-patients/>

⁴ Available at: <https://cela.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/BedBugs-and-Pesticides-Info-for-tenants-in-Ontario-updatedFeb2019.pdf>

The event closed with a visioning exercise in which participants were asked to reflect on ‘What good news story would you want to be reading five years from now about actions taken to address housing concerns in Owen Sound?’ With those positive news headlines in mind, participants worked together to identify actions needed to work toward/attain those visionary goals. Participants identified a number of potential aims and actions, as summarized below. A commitment was also made to continue the RentSafe in Owen Sound initiative, with many participants signing up to remain involved.

Inspection, Enforcement and Regulations

- Create a proactive rather than complaint-based system to ensure healthy housing conditions
 - Conduct routine inspections of all rental properties (akin to how restaurants are routinely inspected)
 - Promote joint inspection teams (public health, by-law, fire, etc.)
 - Ensure that the inspection system has both ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks.’ Carrots include remediation resources for landlords and tenants (e.g., access to funding) whereas sticks include the ability to enforce changes that ensure healthy housing conditions.
 - Consider development of a basic grading system, similar to the ‘Blue Flag’ program for beaches or the restaurant grading system
- Improve the quality, scope and consistency of bylaws for healthy and safe housing
 - Strengthen/create bylaws to ensure minimum habitability standards
 - Promote consistent standards across all 17 municipalities in Grey-Bruce
- Undertake a comprehensive habitability assessment that provides baseline knowledge of current conditions in rental housing (for example, mould, pests, inadequate heat, structural disrepair) and informs further adjustments in by-laws and other relevant regulations
- Improve awareness of habitability standards and ensure compliance
 - Implement a housing provider certification course
 - Implement a mandatory ‘entry checklist’ that housing providers have to meet
 - Provide accessible resources on the rights and responsibilities for both housing providers and tenants
 - Provide accessible resources on what constitutes healthy/unhealthy housing

Policy Advocacy

- Foster collaboration to collectively maintain and provide healthy and affordable housing stock
 - Foster awareness that housing is a social good and common interest for all
 - Promote tenants’ role/contribution as ‘eyes and ears’ on the ground to alert housing providers of problems in their units (e.g., leaks, dampness) before they get worse
- Tackle low vacancy rates
 - Invest in existing vacant (often not well-maintained) properties
 - Build on existing public-private partnerships (e.g. working with developers to house those on waiting lists)
 - Utilize multi-generational housing that matches young renters with older adults who have space in their homes

Tenant Leadership

- Support tenant-led organizing to advocate for healthy, safe, affordable and appropriate housing
- Advocate for Guaranteed Basic Income in light of link between income disparities/poverty and housing inadequacy
- Create more opportunities to build and sustain relationships between housing providers and tenants to enable conversations that empower tenants and foster mutual understanding



Photo credits: C. Sanchez-Pimienta, A. Anbalagan

Annex 1 - List of Participants

Alex Jamieson - Indigenous Housing Outreach Worker, Southwest ON Aboriginal Health Access Centre
Allison Murray - Grey Bruce Health Unit
Andrew Barton - Manager, Grey Bruce Health Unit
Anna Anbalagan – Research Assistant, CEHE
Ann Marie Shaw - Director of Housing, Grey County
Barb Fedy - Director of Social Services, Grey County
Bob Hart – RentSafe Project Team
Brian Minielly - Inclusive Communities Committee in Owen Sound
Carlos Ernesto Sanchez-Pimienta - Research Associate, CEHE
Carol Merton - City Councillor, Owen Sound
Christine MacDonald - Director, Human Services, Bruce County
Clark MacFarlane - Canadian Mental Health Association Grey Bruce
Dave Myette, Councillor, Saugeen Shores
David Roy - Roy Consulting
Diane Giroux - Giiwe Project Coordinator
Donald Cole - Occupational, Environmental, and Public Health Medicine Consultant, Neustadt
Doug McEwen - Fire and Emergency Services, City of Owen Sound
Erica Phipps - RentSafe EquiP Project Lead, CEHE
Francesca Dobbyn - Executive Director, United Way
Greg Nicol - Fire Prevention Officer, City of Owen Sound
Helen Doyle - Ontario Public Health Association / RentSafe Project Team
Jeff Masuda – Director, CEHE / Associate Professor, Queen's University
Jill Umbach - Planning Network Coordinator, Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force
Karen Schlacht – community member, formerly with GBHU and RentSafe Project Team
Kathleen Cooper – Senior Researcher, Canadian Environmental Law Association
Lynda Bumstead - Public Health Manager, Grey Bruce Health Unit
Marg Sanborn - South Bruce Grey Health Centre
Mary Jane Murray – Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force
May Ip - Pathways Development Officer
Mike Seiler - Broker of Record / Owner
Misty Schonauer - RentSafe EquiP Research Team
Nadine Desjardins - RentSafe EquiP Research Team
Olga Gura - Pathways Development Officer
Paige Haverkamp - Health Promoter, Grey Bruce Health Unit
Renee Schlonies - RentSafe EquiP Research Team
Robert Huff - Event Coordinator, CEHE
Rosanne Roy - Youth Justice Services
Sarah Cowley, Sarah C. Consulting
Seana Moorhead - Executive Director, Grey-Bruce Community Legal Clinic
Shari Huber - Owen Sound Municipality Non-Profit Housing
Sharon Irwin – Housing Stability Worker, YMCA
Tania Dickson - Housing Services Manager, Bruce County
Tanya Butt - RentSafe EquiP Research Team
Wally Halliday - Council on Aging Grey Bruce
Wayne Ritchie - City Manager, City of Owen Sound