

Housing Rights... For Adults Only?

BY MAUREEN CALLAGHAN

Jessie's Centre for Teenagers is an innovative community resource centre specially designed to meet the needs of pregnant and parenting adolescents. It was the first agency in Canada with a multi-service approach for teenagers. Now in its eighth year of operation, Jessie's works with approximately 200 families each year, offering a comprehensive array of services and programs for adolescents who are coping with such problems as poverty, social isolation, interruption of education, inadequate health care and health education, scarcity of affordable, appropriate housing, lack of child care services, and a general sense of their powerlessness to effect positive change in their lives.

The housing crisis in Metro Toronto is well documented. The number of homeless people is estimated to be between 20,000 and 25,000. This is shocking, particularly in light of the fact that about half of these people are between the ages of 12 and 18. One of the factors contributing to this crisis is the recent trend in housing construction. In May 1990, the United Way of Greater Toronto analyzed social and economic conditions and trends in Metro Toronto, revealing that between 1981 and 1986 the City of Toronto lost at least 9,000 older rent-controlled apartments to luxury units. An estimated 2,500 units will continue to be lost each year across Metro for the next ten years.

This research also found that apartment unit construction has dropped dramatically, from 8,800 units annually from 1976 to 1988 to 4,700 for each of the next five years. Not surprisingly, the demand for public housing has never been greater. As of February 1990, there were more than 17,000 households on Metro Toronto Housing authority waiting lists, representing over 60,000 family members, as well as over 5,000 households on waiting lists for units owned by the City of Toronto's non-profit housing department.

Pregnant and parenting teenagers are one of the groups most affected by the housing crisis in Metro. Each day the staff at Jessie's work with low-income, single-parent families trying to cope independently in dramatically overpriced and inadequate housing. Many young people who must rely on private market housing pay an income-to-rent ratio of between 50 and 75 per cent. This allows them access to rooming houses, bachelor apartments or shared accommodation, which is grossly inadequate for a young mother and newborn baby. For most young people, the need to secure good long-term housing is their most pressing concern. They are unable to establish themselves in work, school or home life until they can find stable accommoda-

tion. Often they are fleeing sexual abuse and/or physical abuse. They experience discrimination because of their age, limited income, limited life experience and because they are pregnant or have children.

Consequently they are forced into some of the most unacceptable and overpriced housing on the market. They simply do not have the same kinds of housing choices that are available to older, two-income families. Jessie's employs two full-time housing coordinators who balance the need to work daily with teens around their housing issues, with a responsibility to push for broader change in society, challenging the systems, policies and attitudes that prevent young families from having access to

the type of housing many of us take for granted. More specifically, Jessie's housing program currently focuses its energies on:

- advocacy within the private non-profit and co-operative housing sectors for long-term, affordable housing for teen families;
- construction of a 16-unit non-profit housing project which will be owned by Jessie's and managed by Homes First, a non-profit society. Some of the families will be referred from Jessie's, although the building will serve a variety of family compositions;
- establishing a working group of housing advocates, service providers and youth to educate housing providers on the housing rights of 16- and 17- year-olds, and lobby for housing.

The latter underscores the barriers that keep this age group from securing affordable and appropriate housing. An examination of policies and practices governing tenant selection among housing providers reveals this age group to be under-represented as heads of household in municipal non-profit, in co-operative housing and in the most affordable private sector housing.

It has been three and a half years since the *Human Rights Code* was amended to give 16 and 17-year-olds the right to equal treatment in accommodation. However, it has been our experience at Jessie's that this protection has had very little impact. Many landlords, non-profits and co-ops have not changed their policies or by-laws to comply with the new law. In addition, the application process and subsequent requirements tend to exclude young, low-income parents because their age and life experience disadvantage them in comparison to older applicants.

Many housing providers from all sectors have begun to use credit checks in assessing applicants. This practice disadvantages 16- and 17-year-old applicants because young people often

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have poor or no credit rating because they have never borrowed or saved a substantial amount of money. This does not mean that they are any more likely to default on their monthly housing charge. Most of the young families with whom Jessie's works are sure that their rent is paid on time, even if it means that there is little money left over at the end of the month.

References from past landlords are another common requirement. Sixteen- and 17-year olds in need of housing, however, are often leaving an overcrowded, violent or abusive situation. They are often unable to provide a reference from a past landlord. Again, this is no reason to think that they will not be responsible tenants.

In trying to ensure equal representation from teenage heads of household, one of the difficult problems confronting housing providers is the length of waiting lists, especially for subsidized units. There is a rationale for co-ops for instance, to maintain a waiting list based rigorously on a first-come, first-served basis. However, where a waiting list period is over two years, the effect of allocating units solely on this basis is to exclude 16- and 17-year-olds living independently. Unlike older applicants, this age group did not have the opportunity to apply several years earlier. Thus simply changing the age eligibility for applicants does not accomplish equal access for this age group.

When a rule or policy has the unintended effect of excluding a group protected by the *Human Rights Code*, this does not mean necessarily that the rule has to be changed. It does mean however, that the needs of the group must be accommodated where it would not involve undue hardship. In this case, housing providers should allocate a certain number of units to accommodate the needs of the excluded age group. Housing providers should not view such a policy as "jumping the waiting list," but rather as a legal requirement to ensure fair access to a group protected by the *Human Rights Code* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights*.

The time has come to take seriously the housing needs of young people. Strategies must be developed to address the barriers that keep youth from securing suitable and affordable housing.

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MARGITA GAILITIS

Retrograde

He could not
help his bias,
constriction.

His momma
fell off the sidewalk
when he was tender two
Femme fatale
ever after,
she would travel
the mid-road traffic
refusing
the curb.

His Dadda
early converted
the basement to electric
trains. Fantasy stops
till one day he took
to sail, Momma said,
the world with a whore,
infant witch, sea paramour.

The boy grew up
on postcards,
mailed love,
distant care
and the hysterics
of Momma, dodging
trucks, now and then,
failed accidents.

He could not
help his bias,
constriction.

He drips occasional
love like a slow
leaking faucet
exploding sometimes
impassioned for a witch
retrograde sea whore.

Victorian Lace

I've
stepped back
into Victorian
lace, shadows,
garden teas,
searching
winding
dialogue,
where no-one
dares say directly
"Let's fuck",
I've
moved to
an age of
long
afternoons,
days, nights —
an eternity.
My pulse
erratic
leaping
to the suspense
of slow
solutions.

Choice

He did say
that she could choose
to leave him
after he had left.

She did say
that he could choose
to leave her
after she had left.

Vacant room to let.