

## **CENTRETOWN CITIZENS OTTAWA CORPORATION: a dynamic and innovative community leader**

Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation (CCOC) is not only Ottawa's largest private non-profit housing provider, but also one of the largest of its kind in Canada. With a mission to create, maintain and promote housing for low and moderate income people, CCOC has a portfolio of more than 50 properties representing over 1,500 market rate and subsidized units. This award-winning organization, recognized as a dynamic and innovative community leader, is directed and controlled by tenants and volunteers. The organization welcomes tenants from all walks of life and works with community partners to provide housing for people with physical disabilities and others who need help to live independently.

A resolution submitted by two tenants at the organization's 2010 annual general meeting (AGM) to gradually restrict smoking in existing buildings put the issue of second-hand smoke (SHS) infiltration on the organization's agenda. Recognizing that smoke knows no boundaries, and that a gradual transition could realistically take years to achieve, the board submitted a counter resolution: that CCOC's newest housing development, Beaver Barracks, be designated as non-smoking from the outset. The board's resolution also called for a review of the no-smoking policy in January 2013. Members voted in favour of the board's resolution and thus began CCOC's journey toward offering non-smoking housing.

Beaver Barracks is CCOC's most sustainable housing, a 254 unit development that incorporates sustainable features in its design, construction and operations. Comprised of three multi-story buildings and two blocks of townhouses, Beaver Barracks boasts many green features, including high efficiency geothermal heating, a green roof, low-flow water fixtures and the use of low-emitting adhesives, paint and sealants to help improve indoor air quality. Twenty-five units are also wheelchair accessible.

Prior to the AGM, CCOC undertook to survey its tenants on the issue of smoking and exposure to SHS in its buildings. A short 8-item questionnaire was included in NewsNotes, CCOC's newsletter that is delivered monthly to over 1,300 households. Reminder posters and return envelopes were also posted in multi-unit buildings. Of the 20% of tenants who took the time to complete and return the survey, one third reported that they were exposed to SHS from neighbouring units, and 75% reported that no-one smoked in their home. Further, just over half (53%) indicated that they would like to have a no-smoking policy for their building.



With the adoption of the board resolution, CCOC decided that smoking would be prohibited not only within all units at Beaver Barracks, but also on the rooftop patio and on the entire grounds. An article about the policy was included in the monthly newsletter, information was provided on CCOC's website, people on the waiting list were advised, and the news was also picked up in community papers. Application forms remind prospective tenants front and centre that smoking is prohibited, along with signage on the property.

Beaver Barracks' first tenants moved in December 2010 after signing leases with the no-smoking policy included. Incidentally, tenants of this green development also sign "green commitments" and pledge to do their part for the environment. In the first 6-8 months of occupancy, CCOC responded to a handful of complaints about smoking and issued a few N5 notices, which serve as warning letters under the *Residential Tenancies Act*. The warnings effectively communicated that CCOC is serious about its policy and to date no one has been evicted for smoking on the property.

Beaver Barracks is CCOC's biggest development, and in its own words, "a lot was riding on the line." There was concern that the no-smoking policy might turn off prospective tenants and leave the landlord with vacancies. Happily, this has not been the case. However, the policy has not been without challenges. Phase 2 of the development is currently underway, and unfortunately some members of the construction crews need to be constantly reminded that the entire property is non-smoking. The landlord has also received occasional complaints about smoking on the rooftop patio; however, it isn't always tobacco being smoked. The no-smoking policy only addresses tobacco smoke, since marijuana smoking is already prohibited by law. The organization recognizes the challenges of managing tenant expectations—CCOC is not a security company and cannot be expected to police the corridors.

In January 2012 Ottawa Public Health recognized CCOC's efforts with a Smoke-Free Champion award during National Non-Smoking Week. Prior to the opening of Beaver Barracks, Ottawans had very few choices for non-smoking rental accommodations. Thanks to CCOC's vision and leadership, the situation is changing. Congratulations to CCOC—its no-smoking policy reminds us that this landlord is indeed a dynamic and innovative community leader.

For more information about CCOC and Beaver Barracks:

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