

YWCA PETERBOROUGH, VICTORIA & HALIBURTON: A Turning Point for Women

For 120 years, YWCA Peterborough, Victoria & Haliburton has been a leading agency for women who are at a turning point in their lives. Founded in 1891, the YWCA has provided generations of women with transitional housing, education, and support. In 1983 Crossroads Shelter, a 25 bed facility in Peterborough, opened to provide emergency shelter services for abused women and their children. Crossroads is 100% smoke-free and has been so for years. In 1991, the YWCA's centennial year, the YWCA opened permanent housing for women and children only. Centennial Crescent, a Peterborough townhouse community of 40 units, offers rent-geared-to-income, long-term housing for women and their children leaving abusive relationships. Tenancy agreements for these stacked 1, 2, 3 and 4 bedroom units are restricted to woman-led households, and eligible women, considered special priority tenants, must register with the city's centralized waiting list.

Centennial Crescent is very much a community—the street is surrounded by green space with more in the centre, offering an oasis for women and their children. Amenities include a communal garden, barbecue area, play area for children and a multi-purpose, accessible community room. A counselor is available on site to support tenants, and women can choose to participate in a variety of activities, including a cooking group organized through the local public health unit.

In October 2009 a tenant who had recently moved into Centennial Crescent complained that second-hand smoke (SHS) was infiltrating her home from the unit below. The woman had an infant and toddler and was very concerned about the health of her young family. Despite the fact that each unit has its own furnace, smoke was coming through her vents. She had covered them in an attempt to block the smoke and was consequently without heat. The YWCA ended up heating the tenant's apartment with portable electric heaters and hired a contractor to seal the unit. Despite the landlord spending thousands of dollars attempting to seal all cracks and gaps, smoke continued to infiltrate from the lower unit.

Recognizing the significance of the problem, and the importance of working with the tenants to solve it, the YWCA's Housing Manager Catharine Lamoureux took the issue to the community to seek a solution. In December of that same year the YWCA also approached the Peterborough County-City Health Unit for assistance moving forward. A tenant survey revealed that over 50% of the women



living at Centennial Crescent smoked—a statistic much higher than average but not entirely unusual for people who have been victims of violence.

What ensued was a year-long conversation about rights, choices and the need for respect between neighbours. A series of meetings between tenants and the housing manager gave people space to explore the issue and to see things from others' perspectives. Many women indicated that they already go outside to smoke to protect the health of their children. Other women with adult children who smoke indicated that a no-smoking policy instituted by the YWCA would actually make it easier for them to maintain a smoke-free home because it would no longer be a parental choice but a lease requirement. For some smokers, hearing about how their neighbours' health and well-being was being impacted by involuntary exposure to SHS in their own homes helped them come to accept the need for an institutional no-smoking policy.

In November 2010, essentially a year after the initial SHS complaint was lodged, a no-smoking policy for Centennial Crescent was approved by Board resolution and inserted into all new leases. Smoking is prohibited inside private units and tenants are asked to smoke well away from entrances and other people's open windows. The YWCA was very committed to becoming a smoke-free community while at the same time not wanting to push a smoking ban before all tenants recognized and accepted the need for one. Says Housing Manager Catharine Lamoureux, "had this process taken twice as long, that would have been fine too. I'm so proud of what we've achieved here, and that we did it in a way that was respectful and non-adversarial."

Since the policy has been put into place there have been no complaints and no prospective tenants have turned down an opportunity to live at Centennial Crescent. Better yet, the indoor air is now cleaner and women can focus on what's important for them and their families: rebuilding their lives in a safe and healthy community. Congratulations to the YWCA for its passionate leadership and for demonstrating that a no-smoking policy can work when every tenant is consulted and feels included in the process.

For more information about the YWCA Peterborough, Victoria and Haliburton, or Centennial Crescent visit them online at www.ywcapeterborough.org or contact by phone at (705) 743-3526.