

Redefining Social Housing

Words have power for good or bad, and for many social housing tenants, too often it's bad

The terminology that is casually used to describe housing and its tenants needs careful examination and dialogue. Many terms need to be reexamined with respect to the potential stigmatization of both the housing and the tenants. Among the most loaded terms are “wet housing”, “low barrier housing”, “people with persistent multiple barriers”, “the mentally ill and drug addicted”, “hard to house” and “street entrenched”. Even terms such as “homelessness”, and “homeless person”, can have negative connotations for the individuals so labelled.

The terminology of homelessness has provided convenient “red flags” that have been used to justify community opposition to affordable housing. The language used may also be contributing directly to discrimination against the individuals who are being housed by further disenfranchising this already marginalized group of individuals. The opportunity for these individuals to be accepted as full community members is restricted because of this disenfranchisement.

We should also consider that loaded terminology may contribute to the diversion of the public and mass media gaze from the failures of our public social and housing policies, such as the lack of affordable housing, insufficient shelter allowance, and inadequate health services, to the individual tenant and whatever issues she/he might face.

Consider these examples: The generally accepted definition of the term “low barrier housing” is “housing where mental illness or addictions are not barriers”. However, neither mental illness nor addiction are covered under the law (Residential Tenancy Act) and are not barriers to any rental housing, be it subsidized or market. Having been a renter for 75% of my adult life, no landlord ever asked about my substance use or health. As a landlord at Nanaimo Affordable Housing, tenants are not asked if they consume alcohol or drugs or have a mental illness. Even when that information is available or offered, the major concern is whether or not the individual will be a good tenant. So far, no tenant has ever faced eviction for those reasons alone.

Landlords have three basic concerns about prospective tenants - will they pay their rent, will they respect their neighbour's right to peaceful enjoyment of their homes and will they refrain from damaging their apartment. Given that ALL rental housing erects these three identical “barriers”, why do we apply the “low-barrier” label only to affordable housing? In other words, even though every tenant has these same “barriers” applied through the Residential Tenancy Act, we label only one group of tenants.

A further, and perhaps more important concern is that terms like “low barrier”, when used in public discourse, brand not only the housing but also inappropriately labels each and every tenant, a situation that challenges those individuals' right to privacy and community respect. Another term, “wet housing” is often used to put a negative spin on social housing. We could suggest that “wet housing” describes any home where alcohol is consumed, yet the broader community use it to make the individual tenant the focus of blame for their lack of adequate housing.

In reality there is no single reason why people end up losing their homes. For many it is the financial pressures of trying to afford market rental housing on a government provided housing stipend of \$375 per month. There are over 4000 individuals in Nanaimo who receive this level of support and only about 500 subsidized housing units that are affordable at that amount. Some lose their homes because they

are fleeing domestic violence. Some lose their housing because of deteriorating health issues. Some lose their housing because of their own bad behaviour or budgeting choices. There is no single term which can be used to describe them all nor is there one type of housing that each of those individuals need. They are all in crisis and we need various types of affordable housing to accommodate them. The dialogue about housing terminology needs to begin in earnest. A good initial step will be to clean up discriminatory and misleading language.

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