



Social Development Centre Waterloo Region
Eviction Prevention Waterloo Region

Eviction Prevention During Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge's Housing Crisis

Since 2015, the needs assessment for peer-led tenant support has consistently shown that the complexity of housing challenges, coupled with the complexity of barriers faced by marginalized tenants, requires a more holistic approach to assistance.

Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge is facing a complex housing crisis, and marginalized tenants are acutely affected by it. Eviction Prevention Waterloo Region recognizes several major, ongoing issues in the current housing crisis.

1. There is a lack of safe, affordable, and accessible housing options (McDougall, Diwan, Petrovic, Doucet, & August, 2022; Diwan, Turman, Baird, Mehta, Petrovic, & Doucet, 2021).
2. Landlord harassment, abuse, and neglect of responsibilities continue to occur (McDougall et al., 2022; Diwan et al., 2021), especially towards single women, low-income, BIPOC, immigrant, English as a Second Language, and LGBTQ2IA+ tenants. Landlords' neglected responsibilities have led to the following:
 - a. Prolonged infestations of mice, cockroaches, and bedbugs in tenants' homes;
 - b. A lack of heating and air conditioning;
 - c. Persistent mold;
 - d. Broken appliances;
 - e. Plumbing and cleanliness issues; and
 - f. A lack of security, including broken locks, limited lighting, and no surveillance cameras, which creates increased crime opportunities (McDougall et al., 2022).
3. Landlords' communication with tenants is often evasive and confusing or includes misinformation (McDougall et al., 2022).
4. Ineffective Property Standards investigations and enforcement persist (McDougall et al., 2022; Diwan et al., 2021).
5. Tenants often do not understand their legal rights and responsibilities. However, there is a limited capacity for tenants to access affordable legal advice and representation during landlord-tenant conflict and Landlord Tenant Board (LTB) hearings (McDougall et al., 2022).
6. The LTB is facing a significant backlog which increases and prolongs landlord-tenant conflict. The LTB online hearings are also inaccessible for many tenants (McDougall et al., 2022).



7. Tenants struggle to pay their rent and seek legal advice because of increasing rent prices, financial instability, and a lack of access to social services (McDougall et al., 2022; Diwan et al., 2021).
8. Landlord neglect of responsibilities, stressful landlord-tenant conflict, and a lack of options to resolve the conflict and access justice severely damage tenants' mental and physical health (McDougall et al., 2022).
9. Social service providers are struggling with the number, complexity, and eligibility of many marginalized tenants trying to access adequate, robust, and longer-term assistance (McDougall et al., 2022; Diwan et al., 2021).
10. These issues combine to create a situation of ever-increasing displacement due to bad faith evictions, "renovictions," "demovictions," and "forced evictions" caused by prolonged landlord harassment, abuse, and neglect (McDougall et al., 2022; Diwan et al., 2021).

Eviction Prevention Waterloo Region is an ongoing, living, and evolving service that is a response to the current housing crisis. It was created to complement and support existing overburdened services in the community and offer peer support to marginalized tenants struggling or in crisis.

Why Eviction Prevention is Necessary

Eviction Prevention started by seeking partnerships with other community support organizations. We wanted to understand their role, the mandates for their role, and the scope of their work. We wanted to listen, learn, and then step in to help where needs were identified by both tenants and service providers. So far, we have created collaboration agreements with other community agencies, built working relationships, helped each other with system navigation, and shared knowledge to find ways to effectively assist tenants as they face complex housing challenges. The response we have received from other organizations has been one of relief and welcome.

When in crisis, a person's ability to advocate for themselves is negatively affected, and their vulnerability increases. The tenants we support need help connecting with services, support with follow-through, and a more personal approach to receiving assistance. They need peer assistants that can show up in person during a crisis, bring technology to them, and help them understand and comprehend the documents and laws relevant to landlord-tenant conflict and the process of eviction.

Many local social service agencies do not have the capacity or mandate to spend intensive time with tenants, develop relationships with them on the phone and in their homes, or build trust to help tenants facing intersectional barriers connect with community services.



The Region of Waterloo has funded eviction prevention services through Lutherwood that focus on prevention, diversion, and payment of arrears. However, the eligibility for these services is narrow in many cases. Consequently, there is a need for **peer-led** eviction prevention services that are much more comprehensive and intersectional.

Our work also intersects with the work of the Waterloo Region Community Legal Services. We complement their duty counsel by assisting tenants with their cases before a formal eviction process has started. Additionally, we ensure tenants have the necessary support to collect relevant documentation and follow through during the long wait times at the LTB.

Several gaps existed in the system that Eviction Prevention Waterloo Region helped fill, including:

1. The need for “lived experience” peer workers who represent underserved and discriminated against tenants (McDougall et al. 2022) and have unique skills to build trusting and effective relationships with tenants in crisis.
2. The need for longer-term support for tenants (McDougall et al. 2022), including facilitating tenant relationships with other community service providers and helping tenants navigate landlord-tenant conflict and the entire eviction process.
3. The need for assistance with eviction prevention for those who resist working with more formal services or face a range of systemic barriers (McDougall et al. 2022). Some needs include drafting letters to landlords, documenting evidence, mediating landlord-tenant conflict, understanding and comprehending LTB forms and processes, and accompanying tenants at the hearings.
4. The need for in-home meeting options for tenants requiring support.
5. The need for flexible and equitable access to technology for tenants who must attend online LTB hearings.

Who Eviction Prevention Peer Workers Are

We are tenants who have experienced poverty and housing precariousness at some point in our lives. Additionally, we are members of the communities we serve, such as the BIPOC, LGBTQ2IA+, disability, and low-income communities. As people with lived experience and significant advocacy experience, we understand that stress, trauma, and crisis can prevent individuals and households from accessing the right services.

Eviction Prevention is staffed by people who can provide extended, prolonged, and intense support to tenants in crisis. Peer Workers form trusting, safe relationships with tenants by providing relational, trauma-informed support. This peer worker and tenant relationship allows tenants to share, feel heard, and participate in their own advocacy.



What We Offer

We empower tenants to learn about their rights and responsibilities, properly document the situations they are experiencing, and effectively address conflict with their landlords and/or neighbours. To accomplish this objective, we:

1. Share accurate information about landlord and tenant rights and responsibilities.
2. Identify relevant legal, social, economic, or health problems experienced by the tenant in consultation with the tenant.
3. Provide warm community referrals to partner community organizations and ensure tenants have access to appropriate support services.
4. Help create healthy, productive relationships between landlords and tenants and legal intervention and enforcement agencies.
5. Offer in-person and in-home support to tenants and conflict mediation during in-person landlord-tenant interactions, such as during scheduled property maintenance.
6. Assist tenants with various LTB and landlord-tenant conflict issues, including: (1) explaining complex legislation and LTB forms, procedures, and hearings to tenants; (2) helping draft written and documented tenant responses to landlords; (3) providing safe spaces and technology for tenants to attend online LTB hearings; and (4) referring tenants to legal services for legal advice as required.
7. Provide tenants with physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual support as they navigate the LTB and landlord-tenant conflict.
8. Share information with an online following of community members through social media.

What We Have Accomplished

Since its inception in May 2021, Eviction Prevention Waterloo Region has made several accomplishments. Specifically, the following numbers represent our accomplishments during the **6-month reporting period from April 2022 to September 2022**.

1. We supported 47 households, including 90 individuals. We also had 5 pending intakes and 6 intakes in progress at the end of the reporting period.
2. Many of the 47 households we supported included members of marginalized groups, including BIPOC, LGBTQ2IA+, persons with disabilities, low-income persons, English as a Second Language (ESL) individuals, immigrants, and seniors.
3. We helped connect 12 households with local social services and enforcement agencies through referrals.
4. We received 23 referrals from other community organizations.



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5. We built and maintained notable community partnerships, such as with: (1) Waterloo Community Legal Services, including the Ahwenhaode Indigenous Justice Program, (2) Adventure 4 Change, (3) Spectrum Rainbow Community Centre, (4) Family and Children's Services Waterloo Region, (5) John Howard Society, (6) Lutherwood, (7) The Working Centre, (8) The Unsheltered Network, (9) House of Friendship, (10) Reception House, (11) Property Standards, (12) Langs, and (13) Waterloo Regional Police Service Community Engagement Unit.
6. We facilitated a community event for Sunnydale Place tenants so they could meet several community organizations who could assist with some of the issues identified in the neighbourhood. Sunnydale Place in Waterloo is an at-risk neighbourhood due to documented poor living conditions, such as cockroach infestations, flooring issues, mould, broken plumbing, and unresponsive property management (Jackson, 2018). The event we hosted was hugely successful as it broke down language, technology, and travel barriers. It included translators who helped connect ESL tenants with English service providers, and it was in-person and accessible to Sunnydale tenants. It also allowed community organizations to see the faces behind the referrals and emails they receive and bear witness to the language barriers and struggles the tenants face. Most importantly, it fostered a sense of community and solidarity.
7. Eviction Prevention is part of a community outreach team that includes Waterloo Community Legal Services, Waterloo Regional Police Community Engagement Unit, and Adventure 4 Change. The purpose of the outreach team is to educate community members about landlord and tenant rights and responsibilities and the relevant systems of intervention and enforcement.
8. In September 2022, Eviction Prevention received a copy of a decision from the LTB. In this decision, the adjudicator provided a remedy for a tenant we supported during a very long-standing maintenance complaint. The matter took over one year to be heard at the LTB and an additional 120 days for the decision to be rendered. The adjudicator ordered the landlord to complete the maintenance immediately and gave the tenant the power to pursue enforcement measures, maintenance contractor services, and financial abatement.
9. We received continuous support from community members who regard our program as invaluable and necessary due to the current housing crisis.



Challenges We Face

Eviction Prevention Waterloo Region has identified several challenges faced by Peer Workers and the tenants we work with.

1. There is a lack of queer-friendly, safe, affordable, and accessible housing. This gap creates housing precariousness and homelessness and forces low-income tenants to choose between paying rent or buying medication and food (McDougall et al., 2022; Diwan et al., 2021).
2. Young people formerly in the care of Family and Children's Services are often in substandard housing arrangements and/or not protected by the Residential Tenancies Act.
3. Immigrant and newcomer tenants often face language barriers that prevent them from self-advocating (McDougall et al., 2022).
4. There is a suspicious increase in the number of evictions for renovations and "landlord's personal use."
5. Adults in households who do not have their names on tenancy agreements face additional challenges accessing certain legal protections for tenants.
6. Many tenants do not understand their rights and responsibilities, preventing them from self-advocating.
7. Landlord discrimination, harassment, abuse, and neglect of responsibilities often go unpunished or unaddressed due to the power imbalance of the landlord-tenant relationship (McDougall et al., 2022).
8. Many tenants are reluctant to self-advocate due to the fear of repercussions from their landlords.
9. A lack of access to justice exists due to a lack of intervention and enforcement by the police and Property Standards (McDougall et al., 2022; Diwan et al., 2021) and the LTB backlog. These challenges intensify landlord-tenant conflict and negatively affect tenants' physical and mental health and their safety (McDougall et al., 2022).
10. The LTB backlog and a lack of mandated housing mediation outside of the LTB means it is challenging to arrange formal mediations between landlords and tenants in conflict. While Community Justice Initiatives' "Housing Mediation" is a useful service that can help resolve conflict, it is voluntary, and landlords are often unwilling to attend a voluntary mediation.
11. Drug trafficking and violent crime in local neighbourhoods create additional barriers for landlords and tenants to seek support regarding their right to the reasonable enjoyment of the property due to a fear of repercussions. As a result, we have strengthened our relationship with the Waterloo Regional Community Engagement Unit and Community Justice Initiatives.
12. There is a lack of funding for rental arrears and emergency utility support.



13. There is a lack of funding for Eviction Prevention Waterloo Region, which prevents us from meeting the increasing demand for assistance with landlord-tenant conflict and eviction prevention.

Case Example

As an Eviction Prevention Peer Worker, I was introduced to a tenant named Pam (her name is changed to protect her confidentiality) following a referral from a community organization that did not deal with housing. The community organization shared Eviction Prevention's information with Pam's nephew, and he asked for our help.

Pam was a 91-year-old single woman with no family nearby who lived in a rural area. She could not communicate over the phone due to her hearing difficulties, and she was experiencing a sheriff-enforced eviction. She needed to speak to a Peer Worker in person, so I drove to the property to ensure she had some support. I spoke with Pam, the landlord's legal representative, and the landlord's daughter, and I better understood the gravity of the situation. I learned that Pam had few options as we connected on that Friday afternoon. At 91, a shelter was not a safe or viable option for Pam, but she could not stay at the property she was being evicted from.

I helped Pam check into a motel, ensured she had food to eat, and reassured her that Eviction Prevention would help her connect with services the following week. Unfortunately, Lutherwood could not support Pam because they could not meet her at the property she was being evicted from. Additionally, Lutherwood could not promptly assist Pam as she could not communicate over the phone and needed to speak to someone in person. Instead, I found help for Pam after many phone calls to various organizations to determine which organization's mandate could provide the support she needed. I then helped her gather and organize important information she would need when transferring to the support of the Interprofessional Primary Care (IPC) Team. I continued to assist Pam in collaboration with the IPC Team for a couple more weeks.

Pam would have been left vulnerable and homeless as a low-income senior with a disability if she did not have access to Eviction Prevention's support. Instead, thanks to the support of Eviction Prevention and the community partners we worked with, Pam was eventually housed in a safe and supportive building for seniors.

Conclusion

Eviction Prevention is a response to Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge's housing crisis. It fills gaps in housing services by offering longer-term, in-person peer support for marginalized and underserved tenants in crisis. As evidenced by Pam's case study, Eviction Prevention provides invaluable support. The program fits into Waterloo



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Region's Housing Supports eco-system, and it needs funding to continue addressing the high need for tenant peer support and assistance navigating landlord-tenant conflict and evictions.



References

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