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*Executive Summary*

# **TOWARDS A NEW BILL OF RIGHTS:**

*The Voice of Tenants in Permanent Supportive Housing*

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The Dream Team





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# BACKGROUND

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*Many members of the Dream Team have experienced homelessness or housing instability at some point in their lives.*

The majority credit their ability to stay housed to the supports they have received from staff and other tenants in permanent supportive housing units.

Dream Team members frequently discuss the transformational possibilities inherent in permanent supportive housing. Those who are frequently considered the “hardest to house,” due to severe mental health and addictions issues, are more likely to maintain stable residences when their units are affordable and they have access to the right support. Yet tenants of permanent supportive housing

often face challenges in their day-to-day living and access to units continues to remain an issue. There is also a serious concern that the voice of tenants is not being heard.

This report is meant to start a conversation about the way that tenants and service providers can work together to advocate for services and resources to improve the lives of tenants in permanent supportive housing. Our research focused on bringing the voices and experience of tenants living in permanent supportive housing to the forefront.

# METHODOLOGY

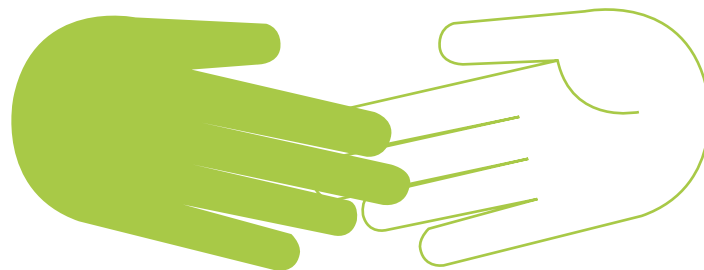
Over the course of a year, the Dream Team Research Committee laid the groundwork for the research to create our New Bill of Rights. Grassroots Research was an early contributor who provided training and worked with the research committee to develop a questionnaire that mixed scaled and open-ended questions.

Members of the Dream Team interviewed 46 people individually. All the interviews were between 15-30 minutes long and held over the phone or in person. Another 36 people participated in six focus groups, which were organized to include key demographics that may have been omitted in the one-on-one interviews. This included people who had interacted with the criminal justice system, lived in high-support units and boarding homes, and racialized tenants.

Our research also included semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight service providers from a variety of agencies. Service providers were added to the data pool to inform our holistic understanding of care in permanent supportive housing.

With the exception of the interviews with service providers and focus groups, peer researchers facilitated all of the research. Tenants were recruited using posters, word of mouth and a post in the Consumer/ Survivor Info Centre Bulletin. During this recruitment period, workers in almost every agency were instrumental in spreading the word. Tenants responded from 21 of 29 permanent supportive housing providers that are part of the Toronto Mental Health and Addictions Access Point. The Access Point is the centralized intake platform for services and supportive housing related to mental health and addictions. The wide breadth of data collection was an attempt to collect perspectives of tenants who live in a variety of houses, neighbourhoods and unit types.

All of the information was analyzed using Nvivo 10 Software for Mac. Relevant themes were highlighted based on their prevalence in the interviews. The research committee met and developed the foundations for A New Bill of Rights by using key concepts from the themes.



# RESULTS

**1** Right to Independence: I am an adult and deserve to be treated as such. I need to be able to “come and go.” I deserve access to private space that I can call my own.

- **1 in 3 people (35%) defined independence as the freedom to “come and go.”**
- **1 in 5 (21%) defined independence as having a private room or a separate unit.**

*I deserve access to private space that I can call my own.*

**2** Right to Access Supports and Services: Service providers and support services are vital to tenants of supportive housing. The provision of high quality supports that are individualized to meet my needs are important for me to maintain my housing and live a healthy life. It also means having workers who care and are regularly available to provide support.

- **3 in 4 (75%) tenants felt that they were receiving enough support because staff really cared, they had access to specific services that they felt strongly about, and they felt staff were easy to access or responded to calls.**
- **1 in 4 (25%) tenants felt that they were not receiving enough support because staff were unavailable or they felt that staff did not care.**

**3** Right to Live in an Inclusive Community: I have the right to be treated with dignity, respect and equality. Differences such as race, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, and mental health status should be supported and accepted. My house should feel like a home.

- **1 in 5 tenants spoke about inclusive communities, which meant they were being treated with dignity respect and equality.**
- **Multiple tenants expressed concern over frequent racist harassment by other tenants.**

*Service providers should take reasonable steps to address any safety concerns related to our building and the neighbourhood. Issues of crime need to be dealt with quickly.*

**4** Right to Empowerment: I have the right to be involved in decision-making within my building and service organization. Opportunities for tenant participation should be meaningful and respectful rather than tokenistic. We know best what programs work for us.

- **1 in 3 tenants spoke about empowerment being an important part of their experience.**
- **In this context, "empowerment" mostly meant two things: playing a role in decision making at an organizational level and having the opportunity to participate in conflict resolution at a building level.**

**5** Right to Safety: I have the right to live in safe and secure housing. Service providers should take reasonable steps to address any safety concerns related to our building and the neighbourhood. Issues of crime need to be dealt with quickly.

- **1 in 5 (20%) tenants did not feel safe in their homes.**
- **The three main reasons for feeling unsafe were: other tenants being disruptive while using or selling substances in their building, the neighbourhood they lived in was unsafe, and/or they did not receive enough support for their health or mental health.**

**6** Right to Secure Tenancy: I have the right to feel secure in my housing. Service providers should inform me about my rights as a tenant. I expect support staff to work with me respectfully on challenges I face, such as violation of rules or failure to pay rent on time.

- **1 in 2 (50%) participants had been evicted or under threat of eviction in the past.**
- **The number one reason for this was rent arrears (or non payment of rent).**

**7** Right to Good Quality Housing: I have the right to live in housing that is in a state of good repair. Issues such as rodent or bug infestations should be dealt with promptly. I expect staff to support tenants who may need assistance in maintaining their housing or common spaces in a clean and safe manner.

- **2 in 3 (63%) participants spoke about the issue of maintenance.**
- **1 in 2 (56%) participants voiced concerns about infestations and cleanliness.**

**8** Right to Recovery: I have the right to live a healthy and holistic life. While the first step to recovery is housing, I have the right to other supports to help me recover. I should not be punished for breakdowns or roadblocks in my recovery.

- **Some examples of support with recovery included staff or other tenants recognizing signs of “not feeling well” and offering support, and helping directly with things like getting groceries.**

**9** Right to Food Security: I have the right to access nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food. This may be facilitated through healthy meals provided within my home, support with cooking and getting groceries, or a referral to community resources. I may need access to training, transportation or other resources to support this right.

- **Food security was discussed in three main ways: the ability to cook independently, food programs at the housing agency, and other community resources.**
- **1 in 4 (24%) participants received food through their service providers.**

**10** Right to Meaningful Activity: I have the right to participate in meaningful activities that support my overall well-being. There should be a variety of activities offered to suit different needs. Tenants should have input into the development of programs and be given opportunities to provide leadership within them.)

- **1 in 2 (49%) participants spoke about the importance of meaningful activity.**
- **The ability to participate in meaningful activities can nurture a sense of community and connection between providers and tenants.**



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# RECOMMENDATIONS

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- 1** We recommend that permanent supportive housing providers endorse this bill of rights as the most comprehensive representation of tenants' voices in permanent supportive housing.
- 2** There is a pressing need for service providers to work with tenants to increase access and quality of permanent supportive housing. We feel that increased communication is an important part of this process.
- 3** There is a need for increased resources to meet the needs of tenants who are currently living in permanent supportive housing.
- 4** It is important to work with tenants to improve the quality of permanent supportive housing.









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