

9.2(b)

ACPD Housing Working Group's Recommendations to Improve Accessible Housing in CityHousing Hamilton Buildings for Simplified Customer Service, Better Quality of Life and More Stable Housing in Accordance With the AODA.

Background

The Housing Working Group spent considerable time over the past two years studying the AODA and a document written in part by the provincial government called "Unlocking the AODA" to learn how the AODA affected housing without saying housing. We managed to identify 17 points of intersection between Housing and the AODA. After inviting Amanda Warren-Ritchie from CityHousing and discussing them with her, we narrowed that list to 15 points that need to be addressed. They are itemized below and recommendations for improvement attached.

- 1. Employers over 50 people are required to be WCAG 2.0 AA web compliant by the end of 2021.**
 - CityHousing does not monitor or test WCAG 2.0 AA web compliance independently, instead relying on the City to have ensured their compliance. As there are still some issues with accessibility on City websites, it is recommended that CityHousing do their own testing

9.2(b)

to ensure the forms and documents used by tenants are fully accessible to all available technologies such as screen readers. Compliance is only the minimum standard and in many places, that isn't enough to achieve accessibility. Having a dedicated CityHousing Staff to develop testing protocols and work towards full accessibility is recommended.

2. New picnic tables, benches and other seating must be installed on level, hard surfaces and connected to accessible pathways.

- CityHousing is taking steps to make any new build's public spaces fully accessible as well as announced that they will retrofit all existing buildings to accessible standards by 2027. The design of accessibility of public spaces is covered by many regulations and guidelines; The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), The Ontario Building Code (OBC), The Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulations (IASR), Barrier Free Design Guidelines (BFDG) and the principles of Universal Design. This can often lead to contradictory requirements or gaps not covered under any legislation.

During the pandemic, all chairs and amenities were removed from all properties. When they were reinstalled, there was an opportunity to make at least one or two amenities at each building accessible

9.2(b)

while the equipment and personnel were on-site and available. While this was technically not a new build, it was a missed opportunity to improve conditions in some small way. We believe that dedicated accessibility staff in CityHousing would be able to take advantage of opportunities like this to ensure accessibility was improved one step at a time as well as assist in planning large scale improvement projects.

3. Playgrounds need to be fully accessible and those with disabilities should be consulted before construction.

- At least one playground has been installed at a CityHousing property that is not accessible. No consultation occurred with the residents to ensure accessibility needs were addressed. A dedicated accessibility department/staff would be better equipped to ensure accessibility and address resident concerns.

4. Required to follow IASR guidelines regarding accessible parking spaces.

- CityHousing is currently in the process of unifying parking policies across all buildings. We will be unable to confirm proper adherence to IASR guidelines until that time. A dedicated accessibility

9.2(b)

department/staff would be able to assist in this process to ensure proper accessibility with regards to parking.

5. If service counters are offered, at least one needs to be fully accessible. 3% of seating in waiting areas is required to accommodate all mobility devices.

- While the service counter on the third floor of the CityHousing offices is in compliance with the minimum AODA guidelines, more effort should be made to improve its accessibility by adding enhancements like contrast strips, tactile marking and pictographic signage to name a few. A dedicated Accessibility department/staff would be able to help with this.

There is currently one waiting area at CityHousing which is the service counter area on the third floor. There is at least 3% of space for mobility devices.

6. Common areas like the front lobbies, laundry rooms or common rooms need to be accessible under the above mentioned guidelines.

- As was mentioned, CityHousing has committed to making all properties and common areas fully accessible by 2027. We don't know if that will be to a minimum AODA standard or if they will attempt to

9.2(b)

make them fully accessible. We recommend that a dedicated accessibility department/staff would be able to ensure the correct improvements are made thereby saving money from having to retrofit or modify afterwards.

7. Housing providers are required to have maintenance plans in place to ensure that the AODA is being adhered to despite the disruptions.

- There is no process for tenants to complain during ongoing work except to deal with the project manager and contractor directly. This is intimidating for many and there should be an independent channel for requesting resolutions. This can also include things like snow removal and grounds keeping. A dedicated department/staff would be able to voice concerns of tenants and work with the contractors and property/project managers to establish proper protocols.

8. Accessibility awareness, equity and accommodation training must be provided to all employees, contractors and volunteers.

- The current training covers the Human Rights Code as well as the AODA. This is proving insufficient in practice as the AODA requires customer service training when dealing with different disabilities and

9.2(b)

sensitivity training to better understand and empathize when addressing the needs of person with disabilities. While compliance is being met, there are too many issues when contractors interact with tenants that require accommodation. A dedicated department/staff would be able to develop special training modules for employees, contractors and volunteers as well as document their completion and track problems.

9. Housing providers must place notice and bulletin boards at accessible levels.

- There are many buildings without bulletin boards at the correct height for people in mobility devices. There is also a problem with notices for people with vision loss. A dedicated accessibility department/staff would be able to address these problems.

10. Leaving notices of entry on doors is not enough with disabled tenants. They may not leave very often and wouldn't see the notice with enough time. More effort is required.

- There is currently no list for people that need accommodations like better notification protocols or more time to prepare. A dedicated accessibility department/staff could assist by keeping a voluntary master list for each building and advising on the best

9.2(b)

method of communication for those with special requirements.

11. Toxic chemicals can trigger Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS). The least toxic should be used when required.

- A dedicated accessibility department/staff would be able to formulate a Multiple Chemical Sensitivities policy for each building dependent on the requirements of tenants based on the information provided on the abovementioned voluntary master list. This would improve the health and wellbeing of tenants, no matter their condition.

12. Accommodations need to be made when showing new units to prospective tenants.

- Currently the policy is to attempt to accommodate when asked for, but there is no standard policy. A dedicated department/staff would be able to provide an array of accommodations that would be available so that prospective tenants could ask for them in confidence. It is suggested to remind people of the options for accommodation at several points in the process as is done with employment. This will help to get honest requirements for modifications before they move in and allow the prospective tenant to assess the space on their needs.

13. An AODA Compliance Report is required every two years. Online Compliance must be reviewed as well.

- Reporting is currently taking place annually to Jessica Bowen but we were informed that they don't test their own online compliance. A dedicated accessibility department/staff would be able to ensure website accessibility independently of City Staff.

14. Housing providers are required to make accommodations up to the point of Undue Hardship.

- There is a clearly defined process to request modifications in the home that involves CityHousing staff, a medical professional and the tenant. Considering the housing crisis currently in progress and the fact that the HWG promotes the principle of aging in place, we are recommending that a dedicated department/staff would be better able to address the concerns and fears of tenants and serve as a neutral representative in these matters between them and the Property Managers to make modifications as their physical conditions change. Due to the fact that affordable housing is scarce, we have learned that people with disabilities are reluctant to approach the property managers to ask for

9.2(b)

modifications for fear that they will be labelled problem tenants. It doesn't matter that there is no evidence of CityHousing responding in this matter, the fear is what we must address. An independent representative would better encourage people to ask for the modifications they require and not suffer needlessly. It could also simplify the application process for those that require assistance.

15. Self-service kiosks are required to be fully accessible and can accommodate those with vision loss.

- This is a major issue of concern that is going to require special effort. This is referring to things like the laundry card loading machines as well as washers, dryers, newer stoves and ovens. As these machines become more reliant on touch screens; the displays are nearly impossible for people with vision loss to use. They are also very confusing to some people and explanations on how to use them should be available in pictograms where possible in order to accommodate language and developmental barriers. A dedicated department/staff can work with each building to ensure the laundry facilities and home amenities are accessible for all tenants as they will be modified on a building to building and a unit to unit basis.

Conclusions:

In doing this research, we had difficulty in understanding exactly how the AODA affects housing, because it doesn't specifically mention housing for the most part. This creates issues for Landlords and Property Managers when understanding their responsibilities under the act. Most see the AODA as a checklist that needs to be marked off and nothing more.

In the fifteen points we mentioned above, we have learned that CityHousing is not actually meeting the minimum standards in the act because no one quite understands them.

Using an example above, CityHousing requires all outside contractors to read and sign off on Human Rights Code and AODA training to satisfy accessibility training. However, according to "Unlocking the AODA" CityHousing is also required to ensure they have accessibility awareness, equity and more detailed accessible customer service training and that is not being done consistently.

CityHousing is required under the act to create a dedicated complaint line/system for people with disabilities to raise issues or provide accessibility related feedback and they have yet to do so. Relying on the Tenant Support

9.2(b)

Worker or Property Manager is not an appropriate alternative.

While CityHousing uses the Hamilton.ca network, they need to ensure their own part of it is as accessible as possible. At the very least, they should develop some testing protocols and run all online forms through accessibility testing regularly.

Barriers are still being created at CityHousing properties to date because there is no one on staff that is specifically trained in understanding mobility and accessibility. As we were informed, CityHousing has received a fund to make all its properties accessible by 2027, but if they don't understand what needs to be done, how do they ensure they have achieved accessibility? We believe that spending more money on staff now would ensure the money is spent efficiently as possible and modified in the correct order of priorities.

Self-serve kiosks are another major issue that needs to be addressed, but it needs to be addressed on an individual basis. Having an accessibility department means that people with disabilities can provide confidential information on their personal requirements so they can ensure all tenant's needs are met. Laundry rooms are a particular point of focus as each building will need their own combination of solutions. Home appliances are also an

9.2(b)

issue here and this department could work to address this on an individual basis.

Finally, given the precarious nature of housing, people are not asking for the modifications they need in their home as they don't want to put their housing at risk. This is necessary though as we know that aging in place is the most economical option at the moment. Requiring tenants to request modifications through their property manager is too intimidating for fear of being labelled a problem tenant. We have no evidence of this actually happening, but that doesn't change the fact that the fear exists. We need a dedicated staff member/department that can represent tenants in these requests as a neutral party.

With regards to extreme heat and climate change, an accessibility department can use their confidential voluntary list of required accommodations as well as the voluntary vulnerable persons list to create peer support programs in buildings that can support them. Adapting living spaces in a rapidly changing environment can present challenges that may be improved by a dedicated staff. This department could also assist in creating education programs on how to manage extreme weather and climate events as they occur.

While AODA compliance is the minimum standard, the ODA specifically requires that we identify, eliminate and prevent barriers. With respect to housing, the AODA's lack

9.2(b)

of any detailed requirements has become a barrier itself and we need to ask how to make these properties and residences truly accessible. The only way we can see to do that is to bring in people that are trained in equity and accessibility and/or to form a citizen advisory committee comprised of tenants from CityHousing properties that can represent these interests.

As to the department itself, we recommend that we start small, hiring one or maybe two FTEs. As the department establishes itself however, more staff may be needed, at least temporarily, as CityHousing has over 7000 units in its current portfolio. If you take the lower national average of persons with disabilities at 22% that gives us 1540 units that may need some level of accommodation. That is a huge job as well as the properties and common areas themselves.

Possible Benefits include:

- Improved Accessibility of Both Property and Residences
- Improved Communications and Website Access
- Clear Complaint or Suggestion Process
- Cost Efficiency By Ensuring Improvements are Done Correctly and In Proper Order
- Improved Modification Process
- Safer and More Enjoyable Tenancy

9.2(b)

- Community Outreach and Education
- Public Health Communications and/or Collaborations
- Improved Housing Stability

Recommendations:

The ACPD's Housing Working Group recommends the following:

1. CityHousing creates a separate department that is to ensure all properties are achieving accessibility or at least taking steps to improve it. This can be done through the following steps:
 - a. Begin by touring each property and listing steps that need to be taken in a priority list to be addressed as labour and finances allow. This will ensure that money allocated to improving accessibility is used as efficiently as possible.
 - b. Create a hotline/complaints system to provide necessary feedback as is required under the act.
 - c. Review the CityHousing website/application forms to ensure they are achieving full accessibility. This may require the development of testing protocols.
 - d. Review and modify the current system to request modifications in the home and serve as an intermediary between the tenant and the property manager.

9.2(b)

- e. Review any new construction or renovation plans to ensure they are addressing accessibility as well as trying to incorporate Universal Design, because it will save money over time.
- f. Review each property's maintenance plans to ensure they are taking accessibility into full account.
- g. Review accessibility training protocols and suggest improvements.
- h. Participate in Public Health's Extreme Heat Working Group as a representative of CityHousing and assist in updating the Community Heat Response Plan going forward.
- i. Attend ACPD Housing Working Group meetings on a biannual basis to maintain regular communication channels