

Meeting a challenge with joy: For Ottawa Community Housing workers, helping extended 'family' is a reward in itself

If there was a moment that best illustrated the impact that the Ottawa Community Housing Corporation (OCHC) and its workers have on low income households in Ottawa, it was during last year's employee recognition event.

A former tenant stood up and told the assembled staff and workers how the availability of social housing had given her more than just a roof over her head, it had given her a future – a second chance at life. Though speaking for herself, she nonetheless gave a voice to the multitude of individuals and families who have OCHC to thank for providing affordable shelter in their time of need.

As the largest social housing provider in Ottawa, one would think it would be easy for OCHC workers to feel overwhelmed, having to oversee 15,000 housing units and respond to the needs and concerns of the 32,000 tenants who call them home. Then there is the responsibility of some to pursue new funding opportunities for maintenance and to acquire new property for the 10,200 households on the waiting list.

The 310 staff at OCHC find inspiration and validation of their efforts by observing the positive change their actions are producing amongst the residents, young and old, of the 162 'communities' that make up their housing portfolio. The former tenant who spoke at the employee recognition event was verbal proof of the impact OCHC workers have on the 'families' they serve, and her gracious comments had an impact of their own.

“Our staff found that very inspiring,” said CEO Jo-Anne Poirier. “These are some of the stories we hear – they're uplifting, and keep us grounded. I really value those meetings.”

The role of OCHC in the community is not just to provide affordable and well-maintained rental housing for those with low to moderate incomes; it goes further than just managing properties. The mission of OCHC and its staff is to engage and interact with their tenants, and, in collaboration with them and community partners, develop healthy, sustainable and secure communities that tenants of all ages and backgrounds can feel comfortable and safe in.

To achieve this goal and promote the integration of OCHC communities within the broader community, OCHC embarked on a program of personal empowerment and community participation for its tenants.

The Safer Communities Program resulted in a staffing increase to ensure that tenant concerns

about safety and security were responded to quickly; the program addressed the root causes of problems identified by tenants and an in-house call center (staffed 24/7) was created specifically for maintenance-related and emergency calls.

The development of tenant associations allowed members of OCHC communities to take an active role in planning decisions and engage in conflict resolution and tenant engagement strategies. With staff assistance, these associations now organize social events that foster new friendships and a sense of community togetherness.

When a recent study showed that 43 percent of tenant households were families with children under the age of 18, staff participated in the steering committee for a youth project called Building Relationships, which ran in two OCHC communities and offered workshops in youth leadership and peer support training. The second phase of the project saw the formation of a youth advisory group and the acquisition of provincial funding for adventure-based leadership training.

Despite the success of the youth project, OCHC staff felt they could do more to help. Following the 2008 retirement of previous CEO Ron Larkin, a scholarship was formed in his name with funds raised with the help of the United Way; available to any registered tenant, the \$1,000 scholarships are applied directly towards tuition fees, books, student fees, or other costs.

But the charity doesn't end at OCHC property lines, or even at the country's border. OCHC actively contributes to the broader community through the annual United Way campaign. In 2007 they donated \$7,000, a sum that more than tripled to \$22,000 in 2008, followed by a \$33,000 donation in 2009. Just recently they raised \$3,500 for Haitian earthquake relief.

CUPE 503 president Brian Madden says he isn't surprised at the great work and commitment to the community that the union's members continually display.

“Our members provide essential services each and every day to make a difference in the lives of everyone they serve. The fantastic fundraising efforts that our members participate in and contribute to shows a depth of character we all can be proud of.”

Between big efforts like fundraising and smaller initiatives like Kindness Week, where staff collect used suits to donate to tenants facing important job interviews, OCHC employees have undoubtedly gained a sense of community and philanthropy.

“When I meet with staff, I see our employees are feeling a sense of optimism and pride in the community,” said Poirier. “We're spending more time celebrating successes, and that's motivating people - our 'family'. Our jobs are tough, so it's important to celebrate success.”

Due to the age of many of the communities, there is a constant need to press for increased, sustained funding to keep up with the maintenance needs of the communities. However, OCHC makes

sure any funds received are put to the best possible uses in the communities that need it most, and this had led to many successes, one being the completion of the renewal of the Banff-Ledbury community, which was made possible by \$6 million in funding from all three levels of government. Staff coordinated each tenants' moves while every unit in the community received repairs and energy-efficient upgrades.

The Rochester Heights community received its own upgrade recently; one unit was converted into a community house (of which there are 16 in OCHC's portfolio) to assist new tenants, many of whom are recent immigrants who are unfamiliar with their new city.

“The community houses are really important to new Canadians who are experiencing difficulties navigating their community for services,” said Poirier. “They've helped the quality of life for our tenants.”

The staff at OCHC can pride themselves in knowing that their tireless efforts have helped thousands of families and individuals find what everyone in Canada should have – a home. Whether helping those who are starting a new life in Canada, or those looking for a new lease on life, the Ottawa Community Housing Corporation has proven itself to be a vital service provider and humanitarian force, a helping hand to those in need.