

106 Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO)

Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy on Bill 132, Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act (Supporting Survivors and Challenging Sexual Violence and Harassment), 2015

Women need support to escape violence; but they also need a place to escape to.

The Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO) is a community legal clinic, funded by Legal Aid Ontario, with a province-wide mandate. We work for the advancement of human rights and social justice in housing for low-income Ontarians through legal advice and representation, law reform, community organizing, and public legal education.

In the furtherance of our mandate, we wish to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy respecting the *Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act* as it relates to its amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act*.

As you know, the Minister's Statement of October 28, 2015 sets out that amendments will include changes to the *Residential Tenancies Act* that would shorten the length of notice a tenant must provide a landlord in situations where the tenant is fleeing domestic or sexual violence. As she correctly stated, "Women, children, families: They all need to be able to leave an unsafe home as quickly as possible".

In ACTO's long experience with the difficult housing issues that confront low-income Ontarians, women and children do not stay in violent and unsafe circumstances because of the sixty-day notice requirements in their landlord and tenant relationships. Nor do they stay because of the legal issues that are presented to them by the constraints of joint tenancies. Women and children stay in violent and unsafe circumstances because they have nowhere else to go.

The statistics speak for themselves. Ontario's vacancy rate is 2.4% - that is, there are 24 vacancies for every 1000 rental units. The average monthly rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the City of Toronto (where 34% of all Ontario tenant households live) is \$1301.00; in Ottawa it is \$1203.00. There are 168,711 Ontario households on the active waiting lists for rent-geared-to-income housing where the average wait time is almost four years. In 2014-15, Ontario increased the supply of affordable rental housing by a grand total of 720 units.

The proposed legislation might assist a woman caught in a joint tenancy situation from accruing many months of rental arrears and the debt collection issues that are often involved. But it is really the lack of affordable housing, accompanied by the lack of affordable child care and the paucity of decent wages that keep women with violent men. Bill 132 is a step in the right direction but the government must not lose its focus on the real job at hand – providing women and children with safe, affordable and well-maintained places to call home.

The real solution to escaping the violence experienced by far too many women and children in their personal circumstances is a meaningful commitment of financial resources to subsidize rents in the private sector or, better still, to refurbish and build more affordable social housing in the public sector.

Without more housing that is truly affordable, Bill 132 provides no real remedy to the widespread problem of violence against women. While the Minister identifies the importance of being able to leave an unsafe home as quickly as possible, she is silent on the real problem of getting that woman re-housed as quickly as possible. When a woman fleeing violence is able to shorten the amount of notice she must give to her landlord thanks to Bill 132, will she find herself, after she has given that notice, with a place to go?

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