

- What a beautiful day, The sun is shining and birds are singing and I am sure that you have enjoyed this virtual conference. The co-ordinators, technicians, and people behind the scenes should be applauded well done.

My name is Anita Dressler. I have been a tenant at Toronto Community Housing for ten years. I have volunteered since my early teens, which is more years than I want to think about (more than sixty years) . Where has the time gone?

In the past, I never thought that I would become an advocate. After all, in my policing days, advocates were a bunch of noisy, placard holding groups that were aggressive and had to be held back. To my surprise, for the last eight years I have been an advocate in Housing, Transportation and Health.

It all started with a sign. There was a gigantic sign outside of my building stating that this building belonged to Toronto Community Housing. It was embarrassing to be stereotyped into everything that I had fought over the years for my children not to be in. I found it humiliating; I set forward into an investigation to find out who was responsible for taking down these signs, and replacing it with a small sign with only the address of the building. After it was taken down and a new smaller sign erected with no wording of Toronto Community Housing, I quickly realized that other tenants started to have a different look and walk and invited their families over more. The next step was to take our building out of the institutional colours of the fifties, burgundy, pale yellow and a

sickly green. With a little effort the building was repainted into the rich colours of today Charcoal gray for doors and frames and light gray for walls. Tenants took pride in the building, planting flowers and plants, welcoming everyone to see their building and giving their friends and family a guided tour. The pride of where they lived shone on their faces..

Perception means a lot.

I have never participated in marches, screaming matches or stormed City Hall with my beliefs.

Instead I choose to use another approach in Housing to advocate.. I went to meetings, listened to issues, and decided that there was no group that was available to address real tenant concerns. I co-started a group named Seniors Voice, our mandate was to help other tenants resolve issues that had been ongoing for years. A small group of senior tenants met and stepped on staff's toes.

We went to buildings in Toronto Community Housing, family adult and senior buildings.

When we went to these buildings we identified many issues: broken windows, repairs in apartments which had been neglected for ten or twenty years. We listened to real concerns, including fear of eviction. Tenants did not believe that we could make a difference. **But we did.**

After every building meeting, a concise, detailed report was sent to Managers in different departments for them to fix items identified. We held them accountable.. Repairs, pest control, security patrols etc. were done immediately.

We referred tenants who were facing eviction to Cynthia Summers and her team at OCHE.

Before long staff were actually wanting us to attend and report. We were actually doing an audit on the buildings. Tenants started calling and asking when we would be at their building.

We involved facilities, pest control, tenant services OCHE., agencies, security and other resources.

We held staff and tenants accountable.

When this group started having problems was when staff tried to take over what we were doing and failed miserably.

We started over and focused only on senior buildings and created SAAC

Senior Advisory and Advocacy Council. Same mandate, same principles and same accountability.

SAAC does not receive any funding. . Our members are loyal and passionate and we spend our own money for transportation, snacks, coffee for the tenants and administrative needs...

Between Seniors Voice and SAAC we attended over 225 buildings. We took information pamphlets with us which included Wheel Trans which is Toronto's accessible transit, Safety hints,

The City of Toronto Senior Strategy, OCHE, Resources for Seniors and how to contact resources. We had this information translated into numerous languages to accommodate the diversity of our buildings.

I am telling you this because I do not want anyone to think of us as seniors of the fifties, sitting in rocking chairs waiting to be led, but as vibrant , experienced souls, with a bag of tricks of our very own.

We like to be guests at agency programs but don't expect us to clean up after you.. **We are far too smart for that.** If it is your program then you do the work, when it is our initiative we will do the work.

We know how to organize, and make sure that everything runs smoothly and help each other to clean up. We are pleased to have Staff and Managers join us. We enjoy programs where a light lunch is served, music for us to dance, sing and clap our hands to.

After all, music is universal and stirs the soul.

Funding is our requirement for proper engagement.

We have stirred up many discussions with Management and staff. In the end it is a collaborative message and action that got things done to the satisfaction of all.

One of my most memorable moments was a sad moment that impacted our whole community, our staff and staff from other buildings.. Our superintendent died of a heart attack on the weekend he was young and vibrant on Friday and was gone on Sunday.

Our tenants and many staff from other buildings were in shock.

He was a terrific superintendent,

Our building needed healing. I took it on myself to have a memorial service for him one month after his death. I relied on members of SAAC to help me.

Word went out to Management staff, his family, tenants and those that had worked with him. 150 people later, the service was held. The CEO gave a heartfelt message to his family.

Our tenants wrote poems and collected \$1,000 to give to his Mother. And another \$500 for trees and plants to be placed on the property in his memory. . We rose to the occasion.

Those tenants who did not speak English had their words translated. We are a diverse community. Our tenants speak Russian, Farsi, Spanish, Korean, Cantonese and Mandarin. Even though we have cultural differences we have programs, special events and help each other.

We were fortunate, the best friend of our beloved superintendent took his place. Tenants did not want to give him a chance.

I convinced him to take a week off. During that time Management worked collaboratively with me. We had his office painted, a new desk and chair. This was now his office. When he came back he was overwhelmed that this had been done. This was his new home.

Shortly, tenants realized that he also was a great superintendent. This was a win-win situation.

At the end of the summer, it was time for something different. I started planning a barbecue. The agency that works with us provided staff to serve food and paid for the musician to entertain. Management staff rented 6 large gas barbecues for our use.

This is another example of joining together and listening to the programs that seniors really want, not what is directed by well intentioned staff and where staff are willing to be part of good engagement..

A tenant who drives took me shopping and we bought food, to meet every dietary need or wants. meats, chicken and fish, Salads, fruits, deserts and other treats. The senior tenants sat at tables and danced and sang to the songs of the musician. Staff were put to work barbecuing and doing miscellaneous chores.

Everyone was friendly, Managers were introduced to other managers who they had received emails or phone calls for years but never met in person. A bond was created and when someone needed something departments worked together and not against each other. How can you say no to a colleague, the person that you just bonded with.

Tables were set with soft blue table cloths and vases of sunflowers. We wanted a cheerful experience.

We actually had over 250 people show up, agency staff, Management staff, community safety officers, our City Councillor, Provincial and Federal Politicians, our tenants and staff from other buildings.

We even had an unexpected occurrence: The Famous SnowBirds which fly over The Exhibition on the last day, flew over my building at precisely the same time that the barbecues were turned on. Everyone was cheering thinking that it had been planned. They even went in and out of formation for us. But it was actually a fluke. Two years later staff and tenants are still talking about the barbecue. We are looking forward to another similar event after Covid.

If you remember that many seniors want programs because they are lonely. Our programs stop depression and isolation.

Seniors want to be useful, not shut away or ignored. Please include us. This will create vibrant healthy communities.

During COVID I arranged four different balcony concerts. The agency that we work with also arranged balcony concerts. The musicians and singers stayed in the courtyard and at the front of the building for 45 minutes on each side of the building. This was so that all tenants would benefit. The singers were from local Synagogues and Churches and musicians arranged by our Agency. Our tenants were on the balcony cheering them on, singing, clapping their hands, dancing and some even took out their musical instruments, Violins and accordions were being played by them. Everyone was elated. The musicians because

they were appreciated and the tenants who were entertained. The programs did not cost a penny just some organizational know how.

350 tenants entertained on different occasions **what a lift to their spirits**. Seniors appreciate every effort that is made for them.. Be creative in your programming.

I am going to leave you with this message, you have a hard task, idealistic view points but in the end what is needed is a collaborative effort. Tenants do not know that so much work is done behind the scenes.. In return you either have too high of an expectation or little expectation of those that you will be dealing with. Make a compromise between the high and low for success.

To our younger group, if you want a rewarding career that will make a difference think of working with Seniors. You will have many frustrating days, much joy, a family made up of your own clients and you will be much richer for it. Seniors have a lot to offer, they have history and experience..

My community is a family and that includes our staff and managers or supervisors that drop by on other business.

Tenants are happy to see them. Before COVID you could see tenants going up to these managers giving them a hug or pat on the back. This is not by accident but by example of what can and should be done.

We notice when buildings are rundown or need a good cleaning, as we are embarrassed to bring our friends or family in.

We notice when a senior tenant is out of control, everyone plays a part in helping the best that they can. We notice when someone is lonely or in need of something.

We need engagement programs to motivate our mental, emotional and physical well being.

We were once young and vibrant, rushing around no time for anything but everything. Sounds familiar. **Stop** take a pause think for a minute--

How would I want to live after I retire? Think about how lonely you might be, outliving friends and family. Think about what you can do to help close the void. Programs where you as professionals can come up with solutions to work collaboratively with Seniors.

Make them your friend not just a case number. You will learn a lot. Don't forget Seniors have been there and done that.

We know what hardships you face and we also know when someone is giving us a story why things are not being done.

Seniors are in Housing because of a twist of fate. Many are immigrants who bring a wealth of history and amazing accomplishments. Other seniors have been educated or developed skills that would also amaze you and a lifetime of experience.. We have been engineers, enforcement officers, worked in health or social services, chefs, involved in the arts and many more worthwhile occupations

Be honest with tenants or your clients, **it will not come back to bite you.**

On closing I am Wishing you a very healthy, rewarding
experience at this conference and a fantastic future working with
Seniors

Praise when it is due and criticize when it is warranted.

Thank you.