

# West Broadway rooming house taps talents

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West Broadway has, very roughly, 75 rooming houses, likely the highest concentration in the city. But they are disappearing as property values skyrocket, landlords sell to developers who renovate the old buildings into single-family homes and the neighbourhood generally gentrifies.

This trend, while not a bad thing for the inner city, is the single biggest worry for West Broadway Community Organization head Greg MacPherson because it shrinks the number of desperately needed affordable housing units and squeezes low-income people out of the neighbourhood.

What rooming houses remain need significant renovations and repairs if they are to continue to function as decent roofs for the poor. Rooming houses tend to get demonized, often unfairly or because of a few bad tenants, so they generate a little nimbyism. And they often elude most housing policies, bylaw inspections, government social programs and renovation grants.

"We've created a system that doesn't protect the most vulnerable," said MacPherson. He says the solution doesn't involve dramatic government-policy changes, though a few tweaks would be welcome. Instead, the solution is to go house by house trying to make things just a few millimetres better for the residents, the landlord and the neighbours.

The idea is to enlist the tenants themselves -- many of whom have secret carpentry, electrical or painting skills -- to improve the house, so they feel invested in their home and neighbourhood. Government grant programs that help fund renovations are vital, says MacPherson, but those bricks-and-mortar fixes don't last if the tenants are left to fend for themselves.

That's where Jovan Lottis comes in.

With a key to the front door and a little money for quality-of-life improvements such as a hallway bulletin board and the veggie garden, Lottis acts as part caretaker, part social worker, part cheerleader and part friend. Key to her job as West Broadway's rooming house outreach worker is to link tenants with the myriad social services that might be just a few blocks away. That includes the Good Food Club, public and mental-health services and addictions agencies.

West Broadway's outreach program is slow going, though. They are working with two rooming houses only so far, and it's a slog to convince other landlords to let Lottis do her thing.

For more on this story, [click here](#).

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