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New report spotlights crisis in housing poor

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Stephanie and Travis Unger own three rooming houses on Spence Street.

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Stephanie and Travis Unger run an inner-city oddity: a really great Spence Street rooming house.

On a block dominated by its slum houses, where as many as 18 people share a couple of toilets, profound poverty and their personal chaos, the Ungers' duplex is a model of what the next step up from homelessness can be.

The rooms are clean and renovated. The tenants pay some of the lowest rents on the street but often stay for years. The common areas such as the living room and kitchen are large



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These are two of the rooming houses owned by the Ungers. (JOE BRYKSA / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)

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and charming. The residents typically eat together every night with the Ungers and their two children, who live there, too.

It's the couple's Mennonite faith that makes them good rooming-house operators. But being hands-on, investing in upkeep and caring about tenants makes good business sense for any rooming-house landlord, Stephanie said.

"If it's just about your bottom line and you don't give a rip about people, it sure shows," Travis added.

The Ungers' eight-unit rooming house, and two others they operate across the street, are a rarity, made more valuable by the dwindling number of rooming houses on their block and throughout the inner city.

In the Spence and West Broadway neighbourhoods alone, over the last 20 years as many as 140 rooming houses have been lost to fires or home renovators or housing agencies that flip them. That's according to a new analysis, to be released today, by inner-city activists and the University of Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies.

Fewer rooming houses sound like a good thing. They're often the nexus of crime and drugs on a street, the lowest form of housing for the very poor, run by slum landlords who profit from squalor. Getting rid of rooming houses should mean a neighbourhood is on the upswing.

In fact, say researchers and inner-city activists, the steady disappearance of rooming houses has meant the loss of as many as 1,400 units of affordable housing, which has likely pushed many people into homelessness.

That count, along with a batch of policy reforms researched by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, will be debated today at a community forum meant to kick-start action by the province and city on rooming houses.

"We're really hoping to see action taken and a task force created," said Jamil Mahmood, head of the Spence Neighbourhood Association. "We know it's an emergency situation and the action just isn't coming at the same pace."

The optics of saving rooming houses can be a hard sell for politicians, and the solutions are a complex mix of tougher regulations that don't drive landlords underground, inspections that clean up rooming houses without shutting them down, targeted capital grants to help good landlords stay in business and social services that help tenants with addictions, mental-health and other problems.

Housing Minister Peter Bjornson and city Coun. Jenny Gerbasi, have both been asked to co-chair the task force.

Though inner-city activists have been raising the alarm about

BY THE NUMBERS

SPENCE ST.

112 rooming houses now

Since 2002 - 40 per cent decrease in number of rooming houses

Lost: as many as 58 rooming houses

Lost: as many as 580 units.

WEST BROADWAY

72 rooming houses

Since 1995 - 63 per cent fewer rooming houses

Lost: as many as 83 rooming houses

Lost: as many as 830 units

—Source: *Winnipeg's Vanishing Rooming Houses: Change in the West Broadway and Spence Neighbourhoods*

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dwindling rooming houses for at least five years, few civic or provincial policies and practices have changed.

Because most people in rooming houses are on welfare, the province funnels nearly \$6 million a year to rooming-house landlords in Spence and West Broadway, effectively subsidizing some of the worst housing in the city.

The Ungers say helping landlords reinvest in their properties without raising rents beyond what welfare allows or what the poor can pay would be hugely helpful.

They say some incentives to license a rooming house with the city and register rents with the residential tenancies branch would also improve the safety and quality of rooming houses. Right now, for example, rooming-house owners pay \$680 to get licensed, an added disincentive for bad landlords trying to

fly under the radar of city fire and bylaw inspectors.

Since they bought their first rooming house in 1999, the Ungers have seen the 400 block of Spence change mostly for the better as some of the worst rooming houses have been turned into single-family homes. But losing more rooming houses would be a blow, Stephanie said. "When you start taking away high-density housing and not replacing it with anything, that's a problem."

The Problem

Rooming houses, already often old and run down, are disappearing in the inner city, which means far fewer housing options for the very poor. Over the last 20 years, 1,400 units have vanished.

The people who live in rooming houses are the hardest to house -- often the poorest people, in the grip of addictions, mental illness or crime and flying under the radar of social services.

A confusing mess of government agencies and departments regulate rooming houses, and none do so effectively. Four separate city bylaws and branches now regulate rooming houses, plus the province's health inspectors, the Residential Tenancies Branch and provincial housing programs. Many rooming houses aren't licensed so they don't get regular fire or health inspections, and many sidestep residential tenancies rules altogether.

No one knows exactly how many rooming houses there are. No one counts or keeps track.

Some solutions

Get all arms of civic and provincial government and inner-city activists around one table to save and improve existing rooming houses.

Get tenants help. West Broadway has targeted rooming houses as part of an outreach program, in which a staffer connects residents with local services, helps with small improvements and acts as a kind of on-the-ground problem-solver. Expanding that program to Spence and making it permanent would cost \$140,000 a year.

Inspect rooming houses routinely, just as daycares and nursing homes are. And update livability rules, so that, for example, a toilet is mandated for every four residents instead of every 10.

Count them, especially the unlicensed, unregistered ones.

Build more affordable housing.

—Source: *Rooming Houses in Inner City Winnipeg: Policy and Regulatory Framework*, draft working paper; *Rooming Houses to Rooming Homes*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba.

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