

ACE's 26th Anniversary
The Board of Directors of the
Advocacy Centre for the Elderly

LIVING VULNERABLE IN PUBLIC HOUSING

September 28, 2010

Remarks by The Hon. Patrick J. LeSage, Q.C.

I am pleased to be here this evening to speak to you on the occasion of the 26th anniversary of the Advocacy Centre for the Elderly.

The work being done by the Advocacy Centre for the Elderly and the vital service you provide are critically important to the well-being of all seniors, especially those in public housing. And, may I add, the residual benefit of much of your advocacy work accrues to all of we seniors.

I have been asked to speak tonight on the topic of living vulnerable in public housing.

Given my own age (almost 75), I believe I have some insight into the changed perspective and thought processes that accompany advancing age and contribute to vulnerability. Mix this with other circumstances, such as low income, and life in public housing can be difficult for seniors.

In October 2009, the Board of Toronto Community Housing Corporation asked me to conduct an independent review of the circumstances surrounding the eviction of Mr. Al Gosling from Toronto Community Housing and to make recommendations regarding TCHC's eviction prevention policy.

Mr. Gosling was almost 82 years of age at the time of his death in October 2009. He resided for 21 years at 11 Arleta Ave., a Toronto Community Housing Corporation building, until he was evicted for rent arrears in May 2009. His problems arose when he failed, or was unable, to complete the paperwork required to qualify for subsidized rent. His rent therefore increased. He could not pay the increased rent. After his eviction he remained homeless until he died of an infection five months later.

In conducting this review, I travelled throughout the city and met with tenants in TCHC buildings to discuss the issues facing vulnerable tenants. I met with persons facing a multitude of challenges in their lives. These included the elderly, the physically and mentally challenged, and those facing significant cultural, financial and family challenges.

When writing my report I was reluctant to set out any one definition of "vulnerability." I believe vulnerability includes those facing a range of challenges and needs flexible parameters. Seniors, as well as those with physical disabilities and mental health problems, would most certainly be included in a group considered vulnerable. It is important to remember that a person who although not previously vulnerable, can quickly become vulnerable. This probability is exaggerated with seniors.

I feel that I may have some insight into the vulnerabilities of the elderly as I now find myself to be at that stage of life. When one ages, there can be changes in mental capacity which can increase stress and anxiety and affect one's judgment. The loss of physical ability such as mobility, hearing and/or vision, may exacerbate one's feelings of isolation. We may suffer a loss of support and social networks for many reasons, including retirement, reduced mobility, the death of a spouse or other family member, and a host of other circumstances. Those losses and changes have a compound effect on our vulnerability.

And, of course, a reduction in financial resources affects one's access to housing, transportation, healthcare, etc., to choices, in so many areas of living.

One very significant issue facing elderly tenants in public housing is isolation. Given the present day reality that public housing does not provide social service supports necessary to reach out to these people, unless they have family and friends looking out for them, they are quickly susceptible to becoming isolated.

In today's world of what some may see as an enhancement of privacy rights, even the most concerned and helpful persons tread the delicate balance of not wanting to violate another's, even if vulnerable, sense of privacy. At the same time, many attempt to keep a caring eye on their neighbour without transgressing privacy.

This tension between privacy and being watchful underlies some significant issues addressed in the TCHC review. It is at the heart of many of the recommendations.

One of the cornerstones of my report is the plea for staff to have much more direct, face to face, contact with tenants.

Given the work that your agency does, I am sure you are well aware of the necessity of having to meet with clients to see how they are coping. The current practice of just sending letters to people, and failing to speak face to face, unfortunately can have catastrophic results.

Not surprisingly, vulnerable persons can very quickly become overwhelmed by a constant stream of letters. The various challenges we face later in life, including vision problems and issues with loss or diminishment of mental faculties, may, and often does, cause us to become confused and upset, whether the letter is from a utility company or from their landlord containing information which is perhaps not only important, but essential to their well-being. I cannot stress enough how important it is to take the time, make the time, to sit down with these people, if possible in their homes, to get an overall assessment of their circumstances.

Public housing is a place where the elderly, with low income, can live independently. A number of the communities I visited were very close-knit concerned neighbourhoods. These communities contained a wealth of energy, expertise, compassion and understanding that needs to be tapped for the benefit of all the tenants.

The reality of public housing in Ontario is that there is not sufficient money in the system, nor is there in the "social agency" system, to provide necessary services to

support vulnerable tenants, whether it be assistance with transportation, social work services or other types of services. There may not be enough resources available to help those in need. However, many of the tenants who reside in social housing buildings are capable of providing some, perhaps many, of these services to their neighbours, or would happily provide them if some assistance was given to help them organize and deliver these services. These would not be the services that a trained social worker could provide, but more day to day living assistance that would help to lessen the stress on these vulnerable tenants. These would be the extra “set of eyes” that are needed to ensure that people do not come into harms way. I found during the course of my review that many of the people with whom I spoke did not have a strong family or friend support group outside of their building. It is therefore imperative to develop and support what lies within the walls of these buildings.

Thankfully, there do exist wonderful community organizations that do their best to help the vulnerable tenants. ACE is a classic example. These agencies need to be able to carry out their work without obstacles being put in their way. This may raise the issue of privacy and consents that are necessary before people can assist vulnerable tenants. I believe that the legislation needs to be changed to ensure that service providers are not precluded from providing necessary, indeed often essential, service due to concerns about privacy laws. We must find ways of dealing with these legitimate privacy concerns while at the same time recognizing the importance of assisting the vulnerable.

The work your organization has done, and can continue to do, including lobbying for changes in legislation, helping these neighbourhoods organize to better assist vulnerable individuals find their way through the myriad of issues posed by various bureaucracies, is invaluable.

We need to inject into the system a more human touch and not be so concerned about processes and procedures. This is what ACE can continue to do, in the future. I admire your achievements and I applaud your successes. Continue the remarkable work for which you are so justifiably proud.

At this point I would like to recognize some students and their teacher for their efforts in raising awareness of this issue. Ms. Rebecca Fleisig, and her class from Edna Staebler Public School in Waterloo. The students in her class created pictorial tributes to Al Gosling from which a collage has been made. The beautiful pictures they have prepared, and the compassion and understanding they illustrate, represents and rests at the core of who we are as human beings, helping those who are vulnerable, who are less fortunate. Hopefully, everyone who looks at this collage will be moved, as was I, to follow their example to lend a hand, spare a few minutes to help those in need.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this evening and for the opportunity to thank most sincerely Ms. Fleisig and her class at Edna Staebler Public School for the humanity she and her class displayed. They prove that we can all “make a difference”.

What better epitaph, could one hope for at the end of our life than “she or he made a difference.”

PJL/iw