

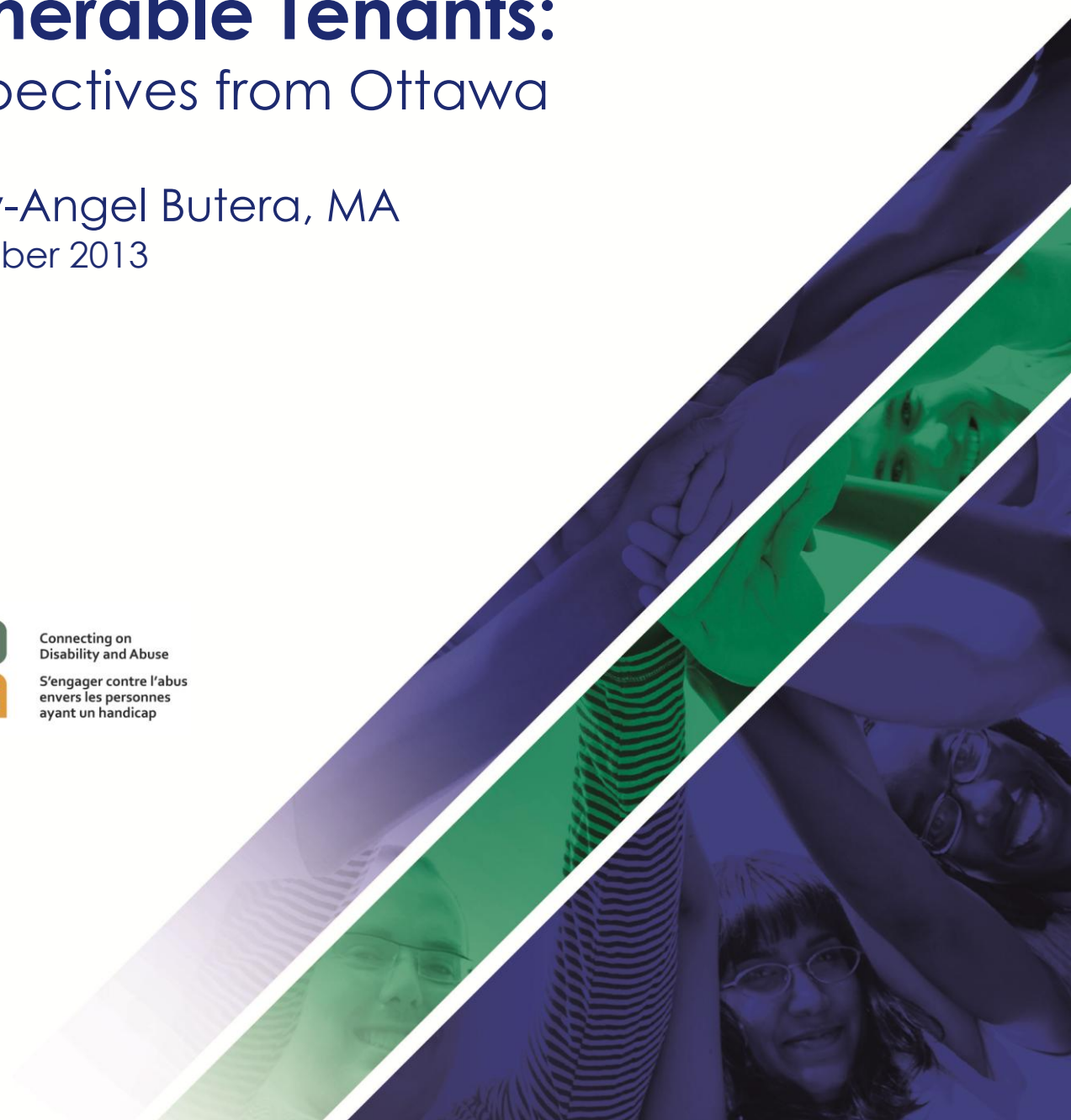


# Home Takeovers of Vulnerable Tenants: Perspectives from Ottawa

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Connecting on  
Disability and Abuse  
S'engager contre l'abus  
envers les personnes  
ayant un handicap



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## Executive Summary

In January of 2013, Crime Prevention Ottawa released a report entitled “Cuckooing”: Unit Takeovers of Vulnerable Individuals. This report revealed that very little research has been conducted on the subject of home takeovers and most has come from homelessness groups from the United Kingdom. Furthermore, while anecdotal evidence affirms home takeovers occur in Ottawa the extent and nature of the problem is unclear. Utilizing both survey and interview research of Ottawa-based frontline workers, the purpose of this project is to provide an overview of the issue in Ottawa including prevention and intervention measures.

A “home takeover” is defined as a situation in which a legitimate tenant or home owner finds themselves unsafe, physically, financially or psychologically, because of the presence of people in their home that they may or may not be able to remove. These situations can range in severity from theft to serious assault; involve a range of relationships from a family relationship to drug dealing; take advantage of the legitimate tenant’s vulnerabilities (IE. addiction, isolation, and capacity limitations associated with developmental delay or poor health); and always render the legitimate tenant or homeowner at risk of losing their home and uncomfortable in their own home.

An overview of Home takeovers in Ottawa based on a survey of 133 frontline workers<sup>1</sup>:

- **Prevalence:** 72% of the frontline workers surveyed have encountered a home takeover. 32% of those have encountered 10 or more.
- **Distribution:** Fairly even with 53% occurring in the South end, 49% in the West end, and 45% in the East end. 17% were specifically cited as occurring in Ottawa Centre.
- **Type of housing:** Majority of takeovers occur in public housing (86% versus 29% in private housing. High rise and low rise apartment buildings have the largest portions of home takeovers (72% and 60% respectively). 41% occur in row housing, 14% occur in single homes.
- **Tenant taken over:** Primarily single tenants (74%), and tenants with vulnerabilities such as drug addiction (61%), mental health issues (58%), developmental disabilities (40%), disabilities (27%), and elderly tenants (25%) are also at a high risk of takeover.
- **Tenant(s) taking over:** Generally, tenants know those involved in taking over their home. 67% were found to be acquaintances of the tenant,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the percentages listed here do not add up to 100%, given that survey respondents could choose more than one answer per question.

friends (27%), and family members (16%). 25% of respondents indicated that those taking over were unknown to the tenant. 87% of those taking over were found to be involved in the drug trade.

- **How frontline workers find out:** 56% of frontline workers became aware of a home takeover by the tenant. Following this was personal observation (42%), notification by another tenant or neighbour (28%), landlord or superintendent (25%), security (25%), police (25%), a service provider (24%), and by a friend or family member of the tenant whose home was being taken over (20%).
- **Resolution:** More than half appear to be resolved by police intervention (55%). Landlord intervention is next at 40%, followed by a service provider (26%), while 22% of home takeovers were resolved by the tenant. 34% of takeovers are still ongoing. Other responses indicated that home takeovers are generally resolved after a series of interventions and support for the tenant from various service providers.
- **Consequences:** The greatest consequence was found to be illegal activity taking place in the home (79%), followed by psychological abuse (65%), emotional abuse (59%), substance abuse (56%), physical violence (55%), theft of tenant's belongings (54%), financial exploitation (53%), destruction of tenant's unit (52%), destruction of tenant's property (48%), physical abuse (48%), substance abuse relapse (42%), eviction (39%), being forced out by those taking over (27%), sexual abuse (22%), and sexual violence (15%).
- **Challenges facing prevention/intervention:** The underreporting of situations that may be considered home takeovers (76%), a lack of awareness among tenants of support available to them that may make them less vulnerable to home takeovers (72%), difficulty checking up on vulnerable tenants regularly (71%), difficulty in helping tenants to recognize their situation as a home takeover (62%), a lack of resources that may help to educate tenants about home takeovers (60%), difficulty engaging neighbours to look out for fellow tenants (52%), and barriers in communication and information sharing between agencies (51%).

A tenant whose home is taken over can be conceived of as a “complicit victim”. The tenant shoulders some of the responsibility for their takeover in the sense that in many cases they accept drugs or have other needs fulfilled by those taking over their home, and often knowingly permits illegal activity to take place even though as tenants they are ultimately responsible for the behaviours of their guests. However, the tenant is still the victim of a predatory or exploitive person or group. The tenant is manipulated based on their vulnerabilities through various levels of coercion, with very little control over what is going on.

In some cases, there can be ambiguity as to whether a home takeover is occurring (IE. having friends over to party for a few days versus a coercive, organized takeover). Respondents acknowledged this ambiguity and recognized that takeovers are complex situations in which they must act in the best interest of their client and their safety and yet they must strike a balance with the tenant's agency, privacy, and their rights as a tenant, as well as the policies by which the frontline worker is bound. All of these must be taken into consideration when implementing measures of intervention.

Six themes emerged from the interview data regarding prevention and intervention:

**Building rapport with people.** Building a trusting relationship with a vulnerable tenant has been identified as a key tool to both prevent home takeovers and to intervene in them. Establishing a relationship where the tenant feels comfortable seeking help when faced with difficulties can help with reporting issues before they become larger problems.

**Education and awareness.** Responses indicated a need for education and awareness concerning home takeovers for tenants vulnerable to takeovers, frontline workers, and the broader community. Topics should include educational materials on the awareness and identification of home takeovers, tenant rights and responsibilities, resources for victims of home takeovers, and workshops addressing empowerment and self-esteem.

**Increasing support.** Respondents suggested that higher levels (frequency and intensity) of support for vulnerable tenants are necessary to prevent and intervene in home takeovers. This support needs to come from a variety of providers (IE. social workers, health workers, personal support workers, probation officers, mental health workers, landlords, and police).

**Multi-agency cooperation.** Inter-agency cooperation and sharing of information is closely tied to increased support services. Increased communication needs to be established between housing support workers, case managers, addictions services, mental health services, public housing security, landlords, other community services providers, tenants, their families, and police. Respondents indicated that the relationship between police, and service providers and tenants needs improvement. According to respondents, part of a solution to this will require compromise from all parties on the sharing of information during home takeover situations and another part will be improving the consistency of police responses to home takeovers.

**Community building.** Facilitating a ‘culture of community’ within apartment buildings is an important aspect of preventing home takeovers. A sense of community would compel tenants to take responsibility and report situations or incidents in their building. Initiatives should include helping to establish networks of support for vulnerable individuals (IE. trusted friends, family, support workers and neighbours) where social interaction takes place so that these vulnerable individuals will be aware that there are people involved in their lives.

**Procedure and property management.** Some survey respondents indicated that they have due diligence procedures in place where potential renters are screened in order to get a clear picture of the history of the tenant and the vulnerabilities they face, and are informed of their responsibilities and expectations. The tenant is then offered support services of community partners. Other methods of prevention and intervention mentioned by respondents with varying levels of success include: trespass notices for individuals or groups who are nuisances within buildings, and changing the locks of tenants to avoid unwanted guests. Some respondents suggested measures including: increasing the amount and authority of public housing security, more proactive involvement of landlords in their buildings, changes to Landlord Tenant Legislation, and rules or lease addendums for guests of a tenant.

Finally, based on the research outlined above, this report makes six broad recommendations for moving forward in a collaborative effort to prevent and intervene in home takeovers:

- 1. Break down barriers to communication and sharing of information** between and among service providers, and police.
- 2. Develop educational opportunities and materials** to be used in conjunction with other methods of prevention.
- 3. Address the predatory nature of drug dealers and the vulnerabilities of people living with addictions.** Acknowledge that drug dealers create demand for their product by offering free drugs to vulnerable tenants and address this aspect of the takeover.
- 4. Improve the consistency of police responses to home takeover situations** to improve the relationship between police, service providers, and tenants.
- 5. Explore how to protect vulnerable adults.** In the case of very vulnerable tenants (IE. mental health issues, developmental disabilities, physical health issues), should options like British Columbia’s Adult Guardianship Act be examined for use in Ontario? What role do quality assurance

measures<sup>2</sup> (IE. policies and procedures on abuse prevention and reporting) play?

- 6. Advocate for the province of Ontario to increase the amount of support for vulnerable tenants** and ensure that tenants are made aware of the support services to them.

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<sup>2</sup> Quality assurance measures are a part of the Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act (2008). Quality assurance measures include policies and procedures regarding abuse prevention and reporting. For more information, please see A Guide to the Regulation on Quality Assurance Measures. Available online at:  
[http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/documents/en/mcass/publications/developmental/DS\\_PlainLangGuide\\_ENG\\_web.pdf](http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/documents/en/mcass/publications/developmental/DS_PlainLangGuide_ENG_web.pdf)

## **Introduction: Addressing The Need for Localized Research into Home Takeovers**

In January of 2013, Crime Prevention Ottawa commissioned a report<sup>3</sup> to explore the existing literature regarding the coercive unit takeovers of vulnerable tenants by drug dealers and gang members. This report found that information pertaining to home takeovers is quite limited in scope and homelessness groups from the United Kingdom have conducted most of the research on this issue. Most of the home takeovers described in the literature pertained to drug gangs targeting (or “befriending”) vulnerable individuals (IE. those with addictions issues, older people, vulnerable young people or people with mental health problems, developmental disabilities, and ex-homeless individuals) and using methods of coercion (IE. physical and psychological violence) or other desirable offers that take advantage of the vulnerabilities of the individual (IE. “companionship”, money, gifts, and free drugs) in exchange for a place to conduct illegal drug activity.

Their situation presents a moral and legal dilemma for the tenant: the tenant is a victim of the drug dealer but is also involved in the drug gang’s illegal activity. Furthermore, the tenant is often afraid to report their situation to authorities for fear of the consequences, which include fear of withdrawal once the supply of free drugs ends, suspicion of involvement in the drug activity, eviction, and retaliation at the hands of the drug gang.

Research in the U.K has found that these individuals generally lack the support systems that can alleviate their vulnerabilities and awareness of where to turn in these situations. It has been suggested that police, service providers, landlords, and other community agencies must be mobilized to detect and deter home takeovers. Multi-agency cooperation is necessary to identify potential support needs of vulnerable tenants in order to help them to maintain independent living.

The realization of this gap in localized knowledge of home takeovers in Ottawa sparked Crime Prevention Ottawa to assemble a committee consisting of Ottawa Community Housing, Ottawa-Carleton Association for Persons with Developmental Disabilities, Ottawa Police Service, Action-Logement, Canadian Mental Health Association – Ottawa, and CODA: Connecting on Disability and Abuse to explore the issue of home takeovers in Ottawa. Together, this committee recognized that while it is known home takeovers occur in Ottawa,

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<sup>3</sup> See: “Cuckooing”: Unit Takeovers of Vulnerable Tenants. Available online at: <http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca/Media/Content/files/Publications/Neighbourhoods/Cuckooing-Home%20takeovers%20of%20vulnerable%20tenants.pdf>



very little is known about the extent and nature of the problem and further research was necessary.

The objective of this report is to provide an overview of the issue of home takeovers, as it exists presently in Ottawa. It presents the findings of a survey of 133 frontline workers and eight interviews, divided into sections based on key themes emerging from the research data. It begins by delving into the definition of home takeovers, highlighting the complexity of these situations. The next section presents the salient results of the survey of frontline workers in Ottawa, followed by a discussion highlighting the problematic nature of home takeovers with regard to complicity, agency, consent, privacy, and tenant rights. It will then look at strategies of prevention and intervention, including key themes such as building rapport with people, education and awareness, increasing support, multi-agency cooperation, procedure and property management, and community building. The report concludes by offering several recommendations for developing a framework of prevention and intervention.

## **Understanding Home Takeovers: Operationalizing a Key Concept**

Given that there is no concrete term used within the literature to describe these types of situations, “home takeovers” is the term that will be used for this task. For the purposes of this research, a “home takeover” is defined as a situation in which a legitimate tenant or home owner finds themselves unsafe, physically, financially or psychologically, because of the presence of people in their home that they may or may not be able to remove. In further detail, a home takeover is:

- A situation that can range in severity from theft to serious assaults;
- A situation which can involve a range of relationships from a family relationship to drug dealing;
- A situation in which difficulty resolving the problem is further complicated by the legitimate tenant's vulnerability. These vulnerabilities may include addiction, extreme isolation, capacity limitations associated with developmental delay or poor health, and the legitimate tenant's pre-existing personal relationship (IE. familial links, friendships, etc.) to the perpetrator;
- Always a situation that renders the legitimate tenant or homeowner at risk of losing their home and uncomfortable in their own home.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>This definition was informed by the initial report released in January of 2013, as well as subsequent committee meetings with much discussion regarding the types of situations that could constitute a home takeover.

Research results reveal that home takeovers are complex, multi-faceted situations that encompass a wide range of scenarios. Depending on the experience of the frontline worker, home takeovers can involve a myriad of scenarios from “friends hanging out” to an organized, targeted takeover of a tenant’s home that always involve the exploitation of the tenant’s vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities include substance abuse issues, mental health issues, physical health issues, mobility issues, cognitive issues, or concurrent disorders that render the individual unable or unwilling to say “no” to the person or persons invading their space.

In fact, in some cases, home takeovers provide benefits for the tenant (IE. free drugs, companionship, gifts, money, sexual services). A survey respondent described this as a situation in which a symbiotic relationship evolves between the tenant (the “host”) and those taking over the home (the “parasite”). For example,

*Often the tenant is being supported in some way, which is usually drugs but can also include food and clothing and free sexual services. I have experience with one takeover of a mother and daughter's unit. The daughter suffered from several mental illnesses and was required to have a special diet and education. I never knew the mother to abuse hard drugs and I can't say she did not smoke weed but was always very well spoken. These people were area drug dealers using her unit as a base of operations and having their friends over, who were also involved in human trafficking and the sex trade. This tenant openly stated the only reason they were there was they paid for her daughter's special diet, her clothes and their food, as well as gave her money towards her special education. She stated they treated her better than the system. I then observed a known drug dealer drop off a pizza for her and leave. This is the exception, and it is still ongoing. How can we treat her better than they are, as she states they treat her with respect, help her with her kid and allow her to come and go as she pleases, but then they step out and deal crack cocaine to the area users...*

This example of drug dealers filling the gap where support services and resources are unavailable or inadequate is perhaps indicative of a larger issue regarding the need to increase support services in Ottawa.

However, despite the perceived benefits of a home takeover, there are far more consequences associated with these situations. Survey results revealed that 39% of respondents encountered home takeovers where the consequence was eviction of the tenant by their landlord. The greatest consequence for the tenant was found to be illegal activity taking place in their home (79%), followed by psychological abuse (65%), emotional abuse (59%), substance abuse (56%),

physical violence (55%), theft of tenant's belongings (54%), financial exploitation (53%), destruction of tenant's unit (52%), destruction of tenant's property (48%), physical abuse (48%), substance abuse relapse (42%), being forced out by those taking over (27%), sexual abuse (22%), and sexual violence (15%)<sup>5</sup>. Only 2% of respondents indicated that there were no consequences in their experiences with home takeovers. Respondents also indicated serious consequences for neighbours and surrounding units such as: fear, noise disturbances, break-ins and home invasions by users and dealers associated with the home being taken over, assaults on others as well as the victim, and sexual assaults on bystanders as a result of the drug dealers being in the building.

## **Survey Research: A Snapshot of Home Takeovers in Ottawa**

In June of 2013, a survey was sent out to organizations and groups in the city of Ottawa that are involved with vulnerable tenants in some way. The purpose of the survey was to (1) identify the scope of the problem of home takeovers in Ottawa, (2) identify current practices or strategies to resolve home takeovers, (3) identify current practices or strategies to intervene in these situations, and (4) to identify consequences for the victims of home takeovers.

The survey was developed online in both English and French through the website SurveyMonkey. A web link was generated for respondents to access the anonymous survey, which was then sent via e-mail to a list of Ottawa-based organizations, groups, agencies, and frontline workers that are involved in various capacities with the housing of vulnerable tenants. To further the reach of the survey, these groups were asked to forward the information to others with similar interests within their networks.

The survey consisted of 17 questions: 3 open-ended questions for written responses, and 15 close-ended questions with preset responses or ranked lists. Of the 133 respondents, 92 respondents finished the survey and 41 exited the survey at some point during the survey. However, data from both the completed responses and partial responses were analyzed.

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that it is possible sexual abuse and sexual violence might occur in more home takeover situations than these numbers imply. It became apparent while interviewing respondents that tenants are typically reluctant to tell anyone when they have suffered consequences of a sexual nature.

<b>Types of Organization</b>	<b>Portion of Respondents<sup>6</sup></b>
Landlord – Private	3%
Landlord – Public	12%
Developmental Disability	17%
Mental Health	12%
Police	11%
Enforcement	3%
Private Housing	8%
Public Housing	14%
Other	22%

### ***Prevalence of Home Takeovers***

Survey responses suggest that home takeovers are more prevalent in Ottawa than initially thought. 97 respondents (or 72%) indicated that they have encountered a home takeover, with 31 respondents (or 32%) having encountered 10 or more home takeovers in their experience. Of these 31 respondents, 29% were from the ‘Police’ category and 23% were from the ‘Public Housing’ category.

### ***Areas of Ottawa and Types of Housing***

The distribution of home takeovers within Ottawa appears to be rather even, with 53% occurring in the South end, 49% in the West end, and 45% in the East end. Furthermore, 17% of respondents specifically cited Ottawa Centre as an area where they have encountered home takeovers.

The majority of home takeovers take place in public housing (86% versus 29% in private housing) with high rise and low rise apartment buildings yielding the largest portions of home takeovers (72% and 60% respectively). 41% of home takeovers occur in row housing, while 14% occur in single homes.

### ***Who is being taken over? Who is taking over?***

Survey results suggest that it is primarily single tenants that are having their homes taken over (74%). Tenants with vulnerabilities such as drug addiction (61%), mental health issues (58%), developmental disabilities (40%), disabilities (27%), and elderly tenants (25%) are also at a high risk of takeover.<sup>7</sup> Single and two parent families were found to be taken over in a fewer number of cases (18% and 3% respectively).

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<sup>6</sup> Respondents may fit into multiple categories or may not have identified with any of them and thus chosen “other”. This represents an approximate breakdown of respondents only.

<sup>7</sup> Given that respondents could choose more than one category for this question, it is likely that tenants may have multiple vulnerabilities that expose them to the risk of a home takeover.

It has also been found that tenants whose homes are being taken over typically know those involved in taking over their home. 67% were found to be acquaintances of the tenant, 27% were friends of the tenant, and 16% were family members of the tenant. 25% of respondents indicated that those taking over were unknown to the tenant. 87% of those taking over tend to be involved in the drug trade. This is supported anecdotally from the interview data. When asked how those involved in taking over a tenant's home locate the tenant, one interviewee responded,

*It's almost like they have "spider sense". Some of them grow up in the community so I mean – that's how the gangs sort of operate in our communities. They have friends who live there and they know people and you know, sometimes they meet them somewhere or they know them through a friend, there are different ways. Sometimes it starts very innocently; they're all just going to have a party now, or "okay, come over". So it's word of the mouth and then you know, they need a place to crash, they need a place to deal drugs out of or sometimes make them.*

In some cases, tenants who are drug users will identify other tenants to drug dealers for a home takeover,

*Some of the more active users... will, as a favour to a drug dealer, identify to the drug dealer where some people who use, live. And I've heard one story of a woman who experienced a takeover; one such person—it was just a friend of hers—came to her unit, knocked at the door. The other tenant who was the imminent victim of the takeover let her friend into the unit and then these drug dealers followed in.*

### **Awareness and Resolution**

56% of frontline workers indicated that they became aware of a home takeover situation by the tenant. This number is somewhat surprising given that prior research suggests that tenants are typically reluctant to inform others of their situations. Following this, frontline workers became aware through personal observation (42%), notification by another tenant or neighbour (28%), landlord or superintendent (25%), security (25%), police (25%), a service provider (24%), and by a friend or family member of the tenant whose home was being taken over (20%).

According to the survey, more than half of the home takeovers encountered by frontline workers are resolved by police intervention (55%). Landlord intervention is next at 40%, followed by a service provider (26%), while 22% of home takeovers were resolved by the tenant. 34% of takeovers are still ongoing.

Other responses indicated that home takeovers are generally resolved after a series of interventions and support for the tenant from various service providers.

### ***Challenges Frontline Workers Face for Prevention and Intervention***

The greatest challenges frontline workers feel are associated with preventing and intervening in home takeovers are: the underreporting of situations that may be considered home takeovers (76%), a lack of awareness among tenants of support available to them that may make them less vulnerable to home takeovers (72%), difficulty checking up on vulnerable tenants regularly (71%), difficulty in helping tenants to recognize their situation as a home takeover (62%), a lack of resources that may help to educate tenants about home takeovers (60%), difficulty engaging neighbours to look out for fellow tenants (52%), and barriers in communication and information sharing between agencies (51%).

### **Interview Research: Key Informant Interviews**

The survey asked respondents to leave contact information if they wished to be contacted for further information regarding their experience with home takeovers. Twelve participants from this list were purposively selected for diversity and contacted for interviews. From these twelve, four key informant interviews were scheduled and conducted. A further four key informant interviews were scheduled and conducted through snowball sampling. The interviews took place in July and August 2013. Five interview participants identified as men and three as women and their occupations included frontline service providers in the areas of public housing, mental health, addictions, developmental disabilities, enforcement, and police as well as two self-identified victims of home takeover situations (one male, one female). These interviews ranged from 20 to 50 minutes. The purpose of the key informant interviews was to gain a more detailed understanding of some of the important issues regarding home takeovers and their prevention and intervention.

The following sections discuss the key themes resulting from both the data gathered from the survey (primarily the analysis of the written answers) and the data gathered from the key informant interviews. These themes include: the complicity of the tenant in the home takeover and issues of agency, consent and privacy, as well as prevention and intervention, including building rapport with people, education and awareness, increasing support, multi-agency cooperation, procedure and property management, and community building.

## **Responsibility of the Tenant: Victimization, Agency, Consent and Privacy**

### **The Tenant: A Complicit Victim**

A tenant whose home is taken over can be conceived of as a “complicit victim”. On one hand, the tenant often knowingly permits illegal activity to take place within his or her home and is responsible for the behaviours of the guests, and yet on the other hand he or she is also a victim of a predator or predatory group. These predators manipulate the tenant based on their vulnerabilities and through various levels of coercion, and the tenant whose home is being occupied has very little control over what is going on.

Both of the tenants interviewed for this project who had experienced a home takeover viewed themselves as victims: one was the victim of a takeover due to her partner's drug debts, but more relevantly here the other was a victim of a predatory drug gang. As the latter victim put it,

*I wouldn't blame the people who are put in that situation. It seems, and at least in my circumstances (...) they are victims, purely and solely victims. And victims need help. Don't criminalize the victims. I was the one who got beat up when police came to my house. I was the one who had everything trashed. I was the one who lost my freedom. You know, they [drug dealers] made thousands of dollars and got off scot-free (...) The police, you know, they treated me like a criminal. I was just a drug addict and couldn't get these guys out of my house and get it under control.*

Although many interview respondents used the words “victim” and “victimization” to describe the tenant and their home takeover situation, there was some consensus that the tenant is culpable for their predicament, at least initially, and then becomes overwhelmed. As one respondent pointed out,

*Home takeovers are not necessarily from outside... somebody might think, “oh these guys just came in and brutalized this person and they got this innocent victim”. It's not like that. There's always participation on the part of that individual. It's not like they take on a single woman, they storm the unit, they beat her up, and that's it – you're our slave. It's not like that; it always starts as a cooperation that becomes a coercion.*

One of the tenants who experienced a home takeover echoed this but pointed out the power of addiction in that circumstance,

*At the time when they offered me the drugs, yeah it was my own decision. It was a stupid one. But it gets to a point where they just – it's like a parasite in your body, if you're really, really thirsty and you want that drink of water, you may know it's dirty and it's going to hurt you down the road but you really, really need it so you take it and six months later you've got a worm in you this long.*

To other groups that intervene, it may also appear that the tenant is "in on it",

*That's what the police thought too, that it was something I wanted, something I desired. And you know they treated me like I was the ringleader in the place. I didn't sell any drugs at all out of my place, it's others used my place to do it. I'm not a drug dealer, I just happened to be addicted to drugs at the time.*

However, there needs to be recognition that drug dealers create demand for drugs, in a sense, by offering free drugs to vulnerable tenants. The research reveals that predatory drug dealers and gangs simply move from one vulnerable tenant's home to another when they are displaced, and there is a sense of futility in attempting to prevent and intervene in home takeover situations because it seems impossible to get rid of these predators when there is a demand for drugs.

### **Responsibility to Intervene versus Privacy, Agency, and Consent**

In some extreme cases, it is clear that a home takeover is occurring, who the victims are in the situation, and the response necessary to intervene in order to resolve the situation. In other cases, the line may be blurred and what appears to be a takeover to one person (the frontline worker, for example) may not be the case to another person or even the tenant.

Research respondents acknowledged that they struggle with finding the line between when a situation is simply friends visiting (or partying, for example) for an extended period of time, or when these friends or acquaintances are actually taking over a home,

*You can't assume the tenant's apartment is taken over. For all we know they're just letting these guys in to party for a few days and then they'll be gone. It happens right? Especially with our clients. They are people who use drugs. So if we assume right away that their apartment is taken over, we would be acting in an unethical way from our program perspective.*



These more ambiguous situations can present a problem for frontline workers because while they may feel the situation is getting out of control, the tenant (depending on their vulnerabilities) may not perceive a takeover occurring or may be afraid to let the worker know what is really going on. This ambiguity can affect how or if the frontline worker will respond.

Frontline workers have a fine balance to strike between ensuring the safety of their clients (and the rest of the building or community), and interfering with the personal privacy of their clients and their tenant rights (especially in more ambiguous situations). They face a number of concerns such as being able to recognize when a takeover is actually occurring, recognizing whether they need to intervene or whether they should, and whether they have the consent and cooperation of the tenant to intervene. If so, how should they intervene and how much? Or will their efforts be perceived as harassment? Furthermore, many respondents talked about how they are bound by certain legislation (IE. Residential Tenancies Act) and have an obligation to respect the agency and autonomy of the tenant as part of their organization or agency's core values. For example, one respondent pointed out that even if they see a lot of (drug) traffic going into a unit based on camera footage, unless other neighbouring tenants complain and the traffic is impeding their right to reasonable enjoyment of their unit, there is no authority to intervene. However, even though there may be no authority to intervene, housing support workers will spend time focusing on this unit to determine the situation going on in the unit and find an appropriate course of action.

As one respondent aptly expressed,

*You wish you had more authority. It's very frustrating to know exactly what's happening and to look at a person that I know is taking advantage of another person – I mean, I see them walk in front of me, I know exactly what they're up to and there's nothing – I'm sort of powerless to do anything about it. You wish you had more authority to intervene with that person. You wish the police could intervene with them without needing so much evidence before going forward. You wish the landlord had more authority to enter somebody's unit if you suspected that there was a guest that was unwanted and remove the guest. I mean we wish we had more control over it. On the other hand, I understand that there are drawbacks to authorities having that much power and control in society in general. It's a fine balance (...) It's a frustrating problem.*

## **Prevention and Intervention**

Methods of prevention and intervention can differ depending on the perspective of the frontline workers who encounter home takeovers. The varying definitions of “success” for each group of frontline workers will also impact prevention and intervention measures. For a social service worker, the desired outcome is to keep their client safe and out of trouble. For a landlord, the desired outcome is a peaceful building or community. For the police, the desired outcome is appropriate criminal justice sanctions for crimes committed. For housing advocates, the desired outcome is that tenants keep their housing. The sections to follow will show that there is a need to build relationships between the various groups and also with tenants in order to coordinate prevention and intervention efforts.

### ***Building Rapport with People***

Building a trusting relationship with a vulnerable tenant has been identified as a key tool to both prevent home takeovers and to intervene in them. Establishing a relationship where the tenant feels comfortable seeking help when faced with difficulties can help with reporting issues before they become larger problems. This entails:

- Maintaining contact with tenants even while they are in a non-takeover cycle
- Continual follow-ups with tenants believed to be at risk of becoming victims of home takeovers
- Regularly checking in on the tenant so that guests are able to observe the relationship the service provider has with the tenant in hope of deterring unwanted individuals from returning to the unit<sup>8</sup>
- Allowing tenants to communicate their concerns and gathering information to help the tenant resolve their problem
- Remaining non-judgmental so as not to alienate the tenant
- Maintaining open lines of communication
- In certain cases, developing a relationship with the both the tenant and the person exploiting that tenant and being present when the tenant reaches out for help

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that it is recognized these first three recommendations are quite vast given the number of vulnerable people independently housed in Ottawa and the current resource levels of support agencies.

Furthermore, survey results indicate that 42% of respondents became aware of a home takeover situation through personal observation, which means that maintaining contact with vulnerable tenants is key to early recognition of the problem.

### **Education and Awareness**

The majority of responses indicated a need for education and awareness concerning home takeovers for tenants vulnerable to takeovers, frontline workers, and the broader community. Caution was expressed in the ability of educational programming to effect change, noting that tenants who suffer home takeovers generally have issues that cannot be addressed simply through a workshop or pamphlet. Nevertheless, the responses provided a number of educational topics. The modes of dissemination for educational responses included information sessions, presentations, workshops, and literature.

**Awareness and identification.** Involves educating tenants about home takeovers. Given that 62% of frontline workers indicated that a challenge to preventing and intervening in home takeovers is difficulty in helping tenants to recognize their situation as a home takeover, educating tenants about what home takeovers are, how they happen and how to recognize the warning signs of a takeover will be key to overcoming this challenge. This information is necessary for frontline workers, landlords, police, and the larger community as well. It would also be useful for past victims of takeovers who have lived the experience to share the signs of a home takeover and what worked for them in resolving the situation with other tenants who may not be aware of takeovers, who are living the experience, or who may be at risk. This would show tenants who have been taken over, or who are currently occupied that they are not alone.

**Safety.** Involves safety planning which includes talking about safety in the home, prioritizing the tenant's home as a safe place, discussing strategies to attain desires in a way that is less likely to compromise their housing (IE. finding positive companionship in the community), explaining the risks of permitting drug dealers into their home and the potential consequences of a takeover, reminding tenants of basic precautions regarding locking doors, being prudent and selective as to whom is allowed in the home, limiting the number of people allowed in the home, and encouraging vulnerable tenants to develop a network of people who they check in with regularly. Education of this sort would also include helping vulnerable tenants to create realistic safety plans to protect their home consisting of strategies to clear the home of unwanted guests, reviewing support systems, and frequent check-ins.

**Tenant rights and responsibilities.** Involves informing tenants about their rights and responsibilities as tenants and the potential consequences when a lease agreement is breached or the person exploiting them is added to their lease.

**Resources.** Involves providing tenants at risk of takeover with clear resources of whom to reach when they are in an unmanageable situation without fear of losing their housing. Such resources would include contacting someone within their support system (IE. a trusted ally, a support worker, the landlord) or a hotline. Crime Stoppers could be used for this purpose but responses indicate that another hotline should be established and responsibility for this hotline should lie with police. Referring tenants to the proper agency (IE. CMHA, IWSO, in-take counselors at community centers) is also important.

**Empowerment and self-esteem.** Many respondents indicated a need for programming geared toward building the self-esteem of vulnerable tenants and providing tools to self-empowerment. Such programming would include workshops and role-playing modules to teach assertiveness and refusal skills so that tenants would gain the ability to say “no” to those who try to take over their homes. It would also involve introducing tenants to safe social inclusion activities to reduce isolation, boredom, and loneliness and to encourage social interaction; engaging marginalized populations in community activities; and establishing workshops on intimacy, friendship, sexuality, and financial skills.

### ***Increasing Support***

In general, respondents suggested that higher levels (frequency and intensity) of support for vulnerable tenants are necessary to prevent and intervene in home takeovers. This support needs to come from a variety of providers (IE. social workers, health workers, personal support workers, probation officers, mental health workers, landlords, and police).

Recommendations included:

- Early identification of vulnerable tenants or tenants at risk of takeover before they move in to their home.
- Partnering vulnerable tenants early on with the appropriate support services and resources
- Ensuring ongoing and long term support services for vulnerable tenants
- Encouraging communication and information sharing among service providers, landlords, and police

It was also suggested that support be increased for those individuals transitioning from street or shelter life to independent living. This includes identifying the individuals with drug addictions and ensuring they are not placed in problematic buildings or areas. Other respondents called for increased safe housing options, outreach that does not criminalize drug users, and support to help tenants with substance abuse to deal with the trauma underlying their addiction. Indeed, this is a difficult task, as one respondent pointed out that drug users often have "brighter phases" and "darker phases". In their brighter phase they feel confident, are less vulnerable, do not want involvement with drug activity, are more likely to seek out support for themselves. But they often fall into a dark phase again, where they have fallen back into drug use and are more vulnerable to a takeover. Thus, more support in the form of addictions counseling is a way forward so that drug users can forge a positive bond with someone who can be a resource for them in those darker phases; someone they can reach out to for help when they face a problem that is unmanageable.

A large portion of responses also called for frequent visits or check-ins with vulnerable tenants. These visits are important because they allow support workers to observe the tenant's situation and see what is going on in their place of residence and possibly identify the warning signs of a takeover. If it is noticed that guests are staying in the tenant's home for a long period of time, or if it appears that problematic activity is taking place in the home, at this point the support worker or staff member can connect with the tenant, discuss what is being observed and their concerns, and discuss the options available to the tenant. Of course, this can be difficult if the tenant cannot be spoken to one-on-one, *"if all the people are there, 'oh no, everything's fine, everything's great, I love it here, everything's super'. But as soon as you talk to them separately, then they're like 'no, this is not good, you gotta get 'em out!'"*. Again, respondents were clear to state that for the most part, they cannot intervene without client consent and only when the guests are clearly uninvited. Even then support workers must act within the ethical boundaries of their agency's perspective with regard to the client's wishes. It was also noted that support and contact with the tenant should continue even when unwanted guests have been identified, *"many service providers either discontinue or put their services on hold when a problem is encountered, or a unit is taken over, in essence the landlord and police are left to support the legitimate tenant and do pretty much all of the leg work"*.

One of the victims cautioned that check-ins can be detrimental and possibly dangerous for the tenant while the unwanted individuals are in the unit,

*What they do is they come to the door and it's like, well this isn't very helpful. If I'm in the middle of a home takeover, the last thing I need is security and police at my door because then you're putting me in jeopardy, because they make it known you're the one who called (...). Why do you come to the door of the person that called you? Because now the entire neighbourhood knows. And then you're called a snitch and then you're really [in trouble].*

Furthermore, 71% of survey respondents indicated that a challenge to preventing and intervening in home takeovers is difficulty checking up on vulnerable tenants regularly. Again, this suggests that an increase in service providers themselves may also be necessary to overcome this challenge.

### **Multi-Agency Cooperation**

Inter-agency cooperation and sharing of information is closely tied to increased support services. Good communication needs to be established between housing support workers, case managers, addictions services, mental health services, public housing security, landlords, other community services providers, tenants, their families, and police. It was noted that once a takeover is suspected, it often takes a collaborative effort of the parties mentioned above to resolve the situation and if information is not shared, "nothing will get done". Examples of what this would look like include:

- Building a relationship between the tenant's family and the landlord so that the landlord is aware of the tenant's vulnerabilities and can report suspicious activity to the family
- Discussing a tenant's vulnerabilities with their landlord and coordinating with appropriate support services
- Increased sharing of information between mental health workers and police
- Support workers and service providers liaising with building security to alert police when a takeover is identified

A number of responses were geared toward increased cooperation and intervention from police. This would involve an increase in regularity of police (and security) foot patrols in problem buildings, working with public housing workers and landlords to trespass unwanted people from buildings, establishing prior consent with tenants at risk of being taken over that police may check up on their well being, and allowing police to have agent status in certain buildings with the authority to remove guests.

Respondents indicated that the relationship between police, service providers, and tenants needs improvement. In terms of the police/service provider relationship, one strategy would be for a team of service providers to work in collaboration with police in a legal relationship where information can be provided so that when a problematic situation arises, specific names and apartment units can be talked about and situations do not have to be talked about in generalities. One respondent suggested a memorandum of understanding related to the sharing of information for the purpose of resolving home takeovers would be useful.

Improving the consistency of police responses to tenants' home takeover situations can serve to better the relationship between police and tenants. One respondent pointed out that even when tenants have the confidence to call the police, their response is inconsistent and unpredictable. This might be because the person taking the tenant's call does not understand the tenant's request and does not realize that the tenant is vulnerable when the tenant says that there are individuals in their home that they do not have the ability to remove, or because the tenant never knows what sort of action the police will take when they arrive at the home. Thus, tenants can feel intimidated by police officers and reluctant to report their situations. As a police respondent stated,

*There was one person I dealt with quite often and what her concern was, is that if she did call police, I guess the gangs – or what she believed the gangs would do is say “all these drugs are hers. It's her apartment” (...) So because she didn't know how we would respond to the situation, (...) she goes “I'm too afraid to call because I don't want to have to go to jail because all of a sudden there's all these drugs and a gun being found in my place and I'm being taken in”. ‘Cause in some cases, it's our practice, depending on circumstances, we take everybody in and figure it out later.*

For this reason, it has been suggested that police officers who take the calls may need more awareness of home takeovers and the police officers responding should use discretion in these situations with regard to whom they focus their attention on. For example, redefining what success looks like for them in a home takeover situation and moving away from arrest-oriented approaches and moving toward helping the tenant who is overwhelmed by unwanted guests in their home,

*It would go further then, right? Because then you know, “okay if I call for help for a takeover all the cops are going to do is come and check on me and that's it. They're not going to start pulling, you know, see if I have priors, and all this stuff”. For example, we have one client who does sex trade and she knows the police officers from the sex trade unit. And so*

*when she was in a jam, she'd call them (...) "There's people in my apartment, I can't get rid of them – can you help me out?" [The police officer] just showed up – "everyone get out" – and that was it.*

This has the potential to improve the relationship between tenants and police since tenants will feel more comfortable with calling police when they are in trouble.

### **Community Building**

Facilitating a 'culture of community' within apartment buildings is an important aspect of preventing home takeovers. Part of this is engaging tenants to feel pride in, and attachment to, their homes so that they will want to protect their space, and having tenants partner with housing support staff to ensure that their home remains a safe place for them, and also for other tenants. A sense of community would compel tenants to take responsibility and report situations or incidents where they believe guests of tenants have been disruptive and causing problems in their building. Building rapport with tenants and among neighbours has been shown to create positive results.

Community building also involves establishing networks of support for vulnerable individuals (IE. trusted friends, family, support workers and neighbours) where social interaction takes place so that these vulnerable individuals will be aware that there are people involved in their lives and keeping an eye out for them. It has been suggested that city initiatives aimed at neighbours getting to know neighbours would be beneficial, as well as efforts to have vulnerable people become more involved in community life.

### **Procedure and Property Management**

For some property managers (IE. private housing), prevention begins before individuals become tenants. Some property managers have due diligence procedures in place where potential renters are screened in order to get a clear picture of the history of the tenant and the vulnerabilities they face, and are informed of their responsibilities and expectations. The tenant is then offered support services of community partners. This is not always possible at the public housing level and public landlords do not have much in the way of screening powers.

According to one respondent, when home takeover situations are brought to the attention of property managers or landlords (via other tenants, support staff, building maintenance staff), a number of steps are taken: the tenant is brought in for a meeting to discuss the situation, a follow-up letter is delivered, outlining the consequences of allowing problematic activity to occur in the unit and the process of eviction, and sometimes, the police will become involved if it is



apparent that the tenant is not in a position to remove the unwanted guests. Other types of frontline workers have found success using official-looking letters with their client's consent to intervene and scare off unwanted guests. These are different from the letters used by landlords, as one respondent stated with respect to supportive housing,

*So first of all we'll always work with the tenant first. "Hey, you know is so-and-so supposed to be in your unit? Are you okay? You know this person's causing problems". We really try to work, access all the services, offer all the services we can, and then we'll go to a warning. And if that's not working, that's when we go through other people so then it's the landlord, it would be an N5, so a cease and desist notice, or an N6, notice to terminate, to the Landlord Tenant Board.*

It should be noted that in most circumstances, property managers do not want to see tenants evicted but sometimes the threat of a tenant losing their housing is motivation to get rid of the individuals occupying their home, since the tenant is most likely aware that it might take years to find another placement in public housing. Whether to evict a tenant or not is a decision always being balanced against the negative impact of a particular tenant on the community. In some severe cases of home takeovers, transfers within public housing are used as a method of intervention. However, transferring a tenant does not deal with the underlying issues that make the tenant vulnerable to takeover in the first place and they may continue to fall into the same situations.

Other methods of intervention include trespass notices for individuals or groups that are nuisances within buildings, and changing the locks of tenants so that regular unwanted guests no longer have access to the home. It should be noted that in practice trespass notices might not be very useful, since those who are trespassed might use an alias or might be escorted on to the premises as a guest of the tenant who lives in the building. Suggested measures involve increasing the amount of security present in public housing (IE. security cameras on every floor and increasing the authority of security to constable status), tightening Landlord Tenant legislation to restrict vulnerable tenants from having people move in with them, and establishing rules or lease addendums that limit visitors to a reasonable amount of time they can visit or stay overnight in a unit.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

A previous literature review on the subject of home takeovers found a significant gap in knowledge related to the issue, especially in Ottawa. The objective of this report is to offer an overview of the situation regarding home takeovers in Ottawa, identify current practices used for the prevention and intervention of home takeovers, and discuss possible strategies to prevent and intervene in home takeovers.

In light of this, here are six broad recommendations for moving forward in a collaborative effort to prevent and intervene in home takeovers.

- 1. Break down barriers to communication and sharing of information** between and among service providers, and police.
- 2. Develop educational opportunities and materials** to be used in conjunction with other methods of prevention.
- 3. Address the predatory nature of drug dealers.** Acknowledge that drug dealers create demand for their product by offering free drugs to vulnerable tenants and address this aspect of the takeover.
- 4. Improve the consistency of police responses to home takeover situations** to improve the relationship between police, service providers, and tenants.
- 5. Explore how to protect vulnerable adults.** In the case of very vulnerable tenants (IE. mental health issues, developmental disabilities, physical health issues), should options like British Columbia's Adult Guardianship Act be examined for use in Ontario? What role do quality assurance measures (IE. policies and procedures on abuse prevention and reporting) play?
- 6. Advocate for the province of Ontario to increase the amount of support for vulnerable tenants** and ensure that tenants are made aware of the support services to them.

## **Advisory Committee**

A special thank you to the Home Takeovers Committee who provided their valuable feedback in the development of this report and continue to work diligently towards addressing this important issue:

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### Ottawa Community Housing (OCH)

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### Ottawa-Carleton Association for People with Developmental Disabilities (OCAPDD)

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### Options Bytown

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### Connecting on Disability and Abuse

- Daniel Boyer and Greg Bonnah\*

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