

June 2019

A Call for Support of Alice Saunders residents

From the Vancouver Tenants Union (VTU)

Two months ago, the 65 residents of the Alice Saunders building in Hastings Sunrise were called into a meeting by the nonprofit organization that runs their housing. They were told that a decision had been made to demolish their building in order to build a complex with many more units. The nonprofit - Brightside Homes - distributed lists of other buildings that the residents could move into, with an information package detailing their tenant protection plan.

Residents were devastated. Many cried, and could not sleep over the coming days. Many reported increased anxiety and stress resulting in increased health problems. A few confided to their neighbours that they contemplated suicide when faced with the prospect of having to leave their homes.

In the months following the news, the seniors living in Alice Saunders contacted VTU for help and channelled their intense anxieties into action, meeting with all levels of government to communicate their concerns and inviting their neighbours to learn of their eviction.

Alice Saunders residents are all over 55, and range up to 80 years old and many have lived in the building for over a decade. They are a diverse community, with many Indigenous and racialized elders. Most are people with disabilities and on fixed income. They are deeply embedded in the community around them, and the building itself serves as a supportive hub for the seniors.

This demographic is disproportionately at risk of homelessness. Between 2008 to 2017, [the number of older adults and seniors living in poverty in Metro Vancouver increased by 284%](#). Rates of poverty for seniors have also increased, and seniors living alone are more likely to experience deeper levels poverty. We also know that seniors experience adverse health outcomes and increased mortality when they experience forced displacement. Relocation stress is experienced by seniors who are forced from one facility to another. Lack of control over the decision to move makes things worse.

Standing up to struggle and place themselves outside of their comfort zone to tell their personal stories to the community around them and the media has not been easy. But [Alice Saunders residents are strong and united](#).

The VTU and the residents at Alice Saunders want our community to understand a few things about what's happening:

1. Brightside's relocation offer does not fit the needs of Alice Saunders residents

Brightside Homes says that they are following the city's tenant protection policy and going above and beyond in providing relocation to tenants. This is not true.

All of the buildings that residents are offered to relocate to are outside of the Hastings Sunrise neighbourhood.

This may seem like a small issue for some, but for vulnerable tenants in old age who have deep roots in this neighbourhood, leaving it behind is not an easy matter. For some, there is no life outside of the neighbourhood, close to their familiar neighbourhood shops and spots.

The same goes for the tearing apart of the Alice Saunders community as the result of individual relocations. The residents are asking to be relocated together if they have to move. These are a group of people who know and trust each other and have grown dependent on each other's support and friendship in order to survive. Studies show that [loneliness is a major problem](#) facing seniors in North American cities. At Alice Saunders, a vibrant building community has solved this problem for many.

Also, most relocation offers are in worse condition than Alice Saunders, with word of mouth reports of units in poor repair, vermin and bug infestations.

Finally, it's important to understand that a relocation offer from Brightside does **not** mean that Alice Saunders residents are not experiencing the worst impacts of demovictions, including ongoing stress and anxiety and the loss of their homes and community. Forced displacement, even with a concrete offer of relocation, is still forced displacement and should not be conflated with voluntary relocation.

2. Most residents will not be able to return

Many of the residents are near the ends of their lives. They expected to live out the end of their lives at Alice Saunders, and likely will have their natural lives shortened due to the stress of displacement. As one of the resident put it: "I'm 73 now. In 4 years, I will be 77. It's hard for me to move now and it's gonna be harder for me to move then too. I'm not leaving and if I leave I won't be coming back."

It's important to understand that not returning is not simply "a choice" that tenants are making. It's the only realistic option. Seniors cannot be expected to live in temporary homes and shuffled around every few years. Moving in and out of different rental units is simply not an option.

3. The removal of 65 units of social housing is a disaster for a city in the middle of a housing crisis.

In December 2018 Vancouver's mayor Kennedy Stewart said, "the solutions to Vancouver's housing problems will have to come from the developers themselves: They need to help create more rentals while not displacing existing tenants." But that's exactly what's happening here. With the demolition of Alice Saunders, the city will lose 65 units of affordable housing for at least four years, potentially longer.

Brightside reports that they are holding units of housing in other buildings vacant to allow for quicker displacement of residents. How is this impacting housing wait lists? Why are Alice Saunders residents (who have secure and safe housing) being prioritized over others who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness?

Brightside says they are in discussions with the city about using the units as interim housing for people experiencing homelessness. This is not a respectful approach to housing people without homes, who are human beings and deserve permanent housing, not to be used as stopgaps.

The most recent [Point in Time homeless count](#) for Vancouver proper is 2138 people with 244 of them being seniors, and this too is [an undercount](#). Clearly, there are more homeless seniors in Vancouver than there are currently available units. If Brightside has empty units they should urgently be housing the 244 seniors who are currently counted as homeless in Vancouver proper, instead of adding to this population by temporarily removing 65 units. Any promise to move Alice Saunders residents directly into existing housing is a promise to push other people down on the waitlist, keeping people who are currently homeless homeless for longer. How can increasing the number of homeless seniors be a reasonable response to a housing crisis? We need solutions that do not increase homelessness, however temporarily.

4. The Alice Saunders building is a sound building

There are no structural issues with the Alice Saunders building. The building has been maintained and unlike many other social housing buildings, there currently are no rodent or bug problems.

The building was built to be wheelchair accessible according to the standards of the day. There is a ramp leading to the front door and ramps to the 2nd floor units. Residents would be interested to see a *retrofit* to allow the building to be more accessible to people with disabilities but this option has not been explored by Brightside.

Brightside says this building was chosen for demolition not because it has reached the end of its life, but because the land where it sits allows for the most units to be constructed there.

Meanwhile, residents living in unsafe and criminally run down social housing around the city badly need their housing replaced, but BC Housing and Brightside have prioritized demolishing Alice Saunders - a sound building, home to a vibrant community.

Furthermore, it's environmentally reckless to demolish a building that is many years or decades away from the end of its life, when it can be refitted.

Alice Saunders residents need your support

There is no question that we need more housing. Any way you look at it, the sheer lack of housing in this city and province is a crisis, especially for poor people, racialized people, Indigenous people and people with disabilities.

While we applaud the Province for investing in this much needed housing, we also believe they should have prioritized tenant consultation in their decision making process before settling on redeveloping this property. We don't think our elders at Alice Saunders should be sacrificed to build more housing.

According to Brightside's development plan, only 50% of the new development, around 70 units or less, will be at the level of affordability of Alice Saunders -- which is between \$700-\$1000 for a studio--while 30% will be at higher rents. Why tear down 64 units if you're just going to one for one replace them and not improve on the affordability? Brightside says only 20% of the units in the new development will be at deeper affordability, which is too small for the price they are asking the community to pay.

Finally, just as we need the Province to invest in social housing, we need the City to come through with providing land for such housing. The VTU and the residents at Alice Saunders are calling on BC Housing and the City of Vancouver to work together to find another piece of land on which to build this new building. Isn't it so much more responsible to build the new units and keep the old ones and the community too? Why are poor people be asked to sacrifice when the City has so much [land that is routinely used for such projects](#)?

We ask the City of Vancouver, BC Housing and Brightside to discuss among themselves an alternative plan that involves City providing land and the Province the money to build Brightside's new project somewhere that does not involve displacement of tenants, especially of vulnerable, senior, low income or working class tenants.

How can you help?

We ask your organization to draft your own letter in support of Alice Saunders residents and send it to:

Vancouver Mayor and City Council:

Kennedy.Stewart@vancouver.ca, Rebecca.Bligh@vancouver.ca, Christine.Boyle@vancouver.ca, Adriane.Carr@vancouver.ca, Melissa.DeGenova@vancouver.ca, Lisa.Dominato@vancouver.ca, Pete.Fry@vancouver.ca, Colleen.Hardwick@vancouver.ca, Sarah.Kirby-Yung@vancouver.ca, Jean.Swanson@vancouver.ca, Michael.Wiebe@vancouver.ca

Brightside Homes: carolina@brightsidehomes.ca

MLA Shane Simpson: sdpr.minister@gov.bc.ca

Shayne Ramsey, BC Housing: Sramsay@bchousing.org

Please ask them to:

- Work together to create a new plan to construct this nonprofit housing complex, using land from City of Vancouver and funding from BC Housing.
- Involve tenants in a meaningful and democratic way to develop this new plan, to reflect the real needs of tenants and the community.
- See this as an opportunity to do nonprofit development differently. This new development should be an example of development done right, one which places tenants at the centre of the planning process. We have to use creativity and courage to do better.

Feel free to attach this letter to yours and copy alicesaundersresidents@gmail.com

Questions? Contact us by phone at 604-999-7418