



# RentSafe

*A Collaborative Initiative to Address Unhealthy Housing Conditions Affecting Tenants on Low Income in Ontario*

## Project Overview



## What is RentSafe?

RentSafe is an intersectoral initiative, led by the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE), to address unhealthy housing conditions affecting tenants living on low income in both urban and rural communities in Ontario. With active involvement of public health, legal aid, community health and other stakeholder organizations as well as tenants and housing providers, we aim to build awareness and capacity in the health, legal and social services sectors so that tenants, when faced with lead, mould, pests, pesticides, radon and other indoor health threats, are better able to get the support they need to achieve healthier living conditions for themselves and their families. This 3-year initiative, launched in December 2014, is funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and further supported by in-kind contributions from multiple project partners.

## Why is RentSafe needed?

A growing body of scientific knowledge underscores the vital role that safe, healthy housing plays in preventing/reducing chronic health effects, supporting healthy child development and fostering physical and mental well-being. Low-income and marginalized tenants in Ontario experience not only housing insecurity but also significant indoor environmental health risks. Mould, lead, pesticides, pests, tobacco smoke, radon, noise, inadequate ventilation, excessive heat/cold, and chemicals from strong cleaners, renovation materials or fragranced products are among the housing-related factors that can affect residents' physical and/or mental health. Children, the elderly and people with existing medical conditions, including chemical sensitivities, are at the greatest risk. Children growing up in unhealthy housing are at risk of not reaching their full potential because of preventable damage to their developing bodies and brains. Unhealthy housing, therefore, serves to perpetuate and potentially increase health disparities and socio-economic inequities.

At present, there is insufficient capacity and coordination in the health, legal aid and social services sectors to effectively address housing-related risks to health and well-being in disadvantaged communities. Enhanced information and supports are needed to assist tenants and the service providers who work with them (e.g., legal aid staff, settlement workers, community and public health staff, tenants' advocates) in addressing the environmental health risks that exist in low-income housing.

## What does RentSafe aim to achieve?

The primary aim of RentSafe is to improve knowledge, capacity and responsiveness within the health, legal aid and social service sectors to better address unhealthy housing conditions facing low-income tenants, as an important step towards the goal of creating healthier living conditions in low-income/marginalized communities and reducing housing-related health inequities.

Through the coordinated efforts of many people, organizations and sectors, RentSafe will lead to:

- **a more tenant-centred system of support and assistance on housing-related health risks**, including improved coordination among service provider organizations, enhanced staff training and more accurate referrals about where tenants can go for assistance;
- **increased knowledge and empowerment among low-income tenants on housing-related health risks**, including how to seek and advocate for assistance and remediation; and

- **improved policy and systemic responses to housing-related health risks**, resulting in reduced exposures and health effects for residents and, ultimately, improved population health.

### What will be done through RentSafe?

CPCHE, with guidance from the RentSafe Advisory Committee and with core elements led by contributing partners, is convening and facilitating the three-phased RentSafe initiative:

**Phase 1: Baseline assessment and report:** We are gathering and synthesizing knowledge and experience on priority indoor environmental health issues of concern for low-income tenants and assessing the existing capacity within the social services sector to respond to such concerns, drawing upon province-wide surveys with public health, legal aid and front-line service professionals, as well as focus groups with tenants in two urban and two rural communities. A summary baseline report will be prepared and publicly released.

**Phase 2: Multi-stakeholder Roundtable:** We will engage a broad range of stakeholders, including social services agencies, municipal/provincial/federal departments, tenants, landlords/building managers, housing advocates, legal aid and health professionals and others in a facilitated Roundtable (November 22-23, 2016 in Hamilton) to solicit ideas and direction from those who are experiencing and/or are in a position to take action on these issues, with a particular focus on identifying actions and strategies for building health, legal and social services capacity and responsiveness on environmental health concerns in low-income housing.

**Phase 3: Capacity building and education:** Informed by the preceding phases, we will take steps to build knowledge, capacity and cross-linkages among relevant service providers and create more supportive conditions for tenants to obtain information and seek corrective action. Specifically, we will involve service providers in the development and use of (a) a video for educating/training service providers, medical students and others on the visible and invisible housing conditions that may be affecting their clients' health, and (b) outreach materials that service providers can adapt and use to increase public awareness on housing-related health risks and where/how to seek assistance.

### Who is involved in RentSafe implementation?

The **Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE)** – a collaboration of 9 partner organizations and 6 affiliates with more than a decade of experience in advancing multi-sectoral collaboration towards healthier indoor and outdoor environments for children and families – is leading the RentSafe initiative. The **Environmental Health Institute of Canada (EHI-Canada)** is the lead CPCHE partner for the initiative and the fiduciary host. A **RentSafe Advisory Committee** provides overall guidance for the project and facilitates sustained engagement of key organizations and sectors. The **RentSafe Project Team**, comprised of the organizations that are leading specific elements of the multi-faceted RentSafe initiative, ensures effective project implementation.

Individual CPCHE partner/affiliate organizations are leading specific aspects of the work largely through in-kind contributions, including the **Canadian Environmental Law Association** (survey of legal aid clinics, case law review), the **Ontario Public Health Association** (survey of public health units), **South Riverdale Community Health Centre** (tenant focus groups, survey of front-line service providers), **Toronto Public Health** (tenant focus groups), and the **Centre for Environmental Health Equity** at Queen's University (expertise on tenant engagement). Other RentSafe collaborating organizations include **Grey Bruce Health Unit** (survey of municipal property standards officials; joint public health-municipal inspection pilot; tenant and landlord focus groups), **Lanark Renfrew Health and Community Services** and **The Table Community Food Centre** (tenant focus groups), and **McMaster Institute for Healthier Environments** (host of the Roundtable).

### For more information:

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