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Toronto's Rodent War thanks to TCHC's lack of maintenance and repairs



Title: *Tenant's Unusable Kitchen at Swansea Mews*
Photograph: **The Toronto Tribune**

For over 5 years, Vagoline "Vi" Miller, has battled rats and mice in her home. Her landlord, Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), has done nothing to exterminate the pests. The tenant reached out for help. Recently, The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), Health Providers Against Poverty, TCHC security and three members of the Toronto Police joined the battle against the rats to help Vi and her children. Who would win?

First Round Winner: Rodents

Vi and her 7 children live in a two floor town house part of the Swansea Mews complex. Her landlord, TCHC manages the property on behalf of the city of Toronto. The rodents have complete control of the first floor. Vi's kitchen is unusable because of the pests. Open the fridge and find rat droppings. That makes it difficult to all but impossible for her to feed her children a healthy diet. On the second floor the pests' domain includes all of the closet space.

TCHC faces a \$300 million class-action lawsuit that is about to be launched by Roach, Schwartz & associates on behalf of TCHC tenants. The preliminary steps have been taken with the filing

of a Notice of Intention to Litigate, a step one must take when suing the Government of Ontario. The City of Toronto and TCHC have been named in this action.



Title: Sarah Shartal announcing the Notice of Intention to Litigate against The Government of Ontario, The City of Toronto and TCHC
Photograph: [The Toronto Tribune](#)

Sarah Shartal, of Roach, Schwartz & Associates said, "The Class Action concerns the inability and unwillingness of TCHC to repair the buildings to the basic standards of the building code and the municipal by-laws. This is not small issues. In this class action we named the Province, the City and TCHC. TCHC has \$5 billion in assets." The assets include their Headquarters located in the tony Toronto suburb of Rosedale. According to the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation the TCHC Rosedale HQ for the tax year 2007 was assessed at \$5,961,000. There are \$300 million in outstanding repairs. TCHC claim that they don't have the money to make repairs but can afford to maintain a \$6 million dollar Rosedale HQ office building. The tenants live in slum, Derek Ballantyne, CEO of TCHC and other head office staff work out of Rosedale.



Title: *Mice and Rodent Droppings in Fridge at Swansea Mews*
Photograph: [The Toronto Tribune](#)

In the spring of this year The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty launched a campaign to support the TCHC tenants. They invited TCHC tenants to contact them with their complaints and took a list of reports to the August 1st TCHC board meeting. Vi Miller was among the tenants that took up OCAP's offer of help. Because Vi had the courage to go public one of the ways OCAP helped was to contact the Health Providers Against Poverty and have them visit Vi's home and make their report, which is below.

Health Providers Against Poverty vs Rodents.

Dr. Gary Bloch of the Health Providers Against Poverty (HPAP) said, "HPAP is a multi-disciplinary organization of Health Providers, working to alleviate the health effects of poverty, most directly by alleviating poverty itself, but also doing what we can do within the health sphere to decrease the affect of poverty on people's health. We work in a number of different streams. We work through direct clinical work for people working in poverty such as our special diet clinics where we assess people who are on welfare for an extra income supplement, we do advocacy work with all levels of government, outreach work in terms of education of health providers mainly but also of people within the Anti-poverty movement around the health. All the members are front-line health providers that work directly with people living with poverty. We work mostly from Toronto's inner city but we also have people in surrounding cities as well."

The Health Issues of Swansea Mews

Dr. Bloch, of Health Providers Against Poverty's statement regarding his findings at Swansea Mews, "I am a family physician in downtown Toronto, and a member of Health Providers Against Poverty. On August 7, I visited a housing unit in Swansea Mews. There is one adult woman with 7 children (from 1 to 15 years old) living in this two-storey, 3-bedroom unit.

"The condition of this unit is atrocious. The tenant and her children are living with large numbers of rats and mice, black mould, frank holes in an exterior door, lack of privacy caused by the degradation of inside doors, an unusable kitchen due to mouse infestation, exposed floor-level heating elements, exposed electrical wiring (some of which has caused electrical shocks to her and her family members), and frank overcrowding.

"The tenant, on questioning, indicated to me that she has lived in the unit for 15 years, and has complained about these problems to her landlord on numerous and repeated occasions over the past 5-6 years. In most cases, no action was taken, and the problems have become consistently worse.



Title: *Black Mould in Closet at Swansea Mews*
Photograph: **The Toronto Tribune**

"There are a number of health risks posed by these housing conditions. First, respiratory problems such as asthma may be caused or worsened by mould and abundant rodent droppings. These may also cause allergic reactions. Second, the physical hazards, including the exposed heating elements and electrical wiring, and exposure to the elements through the inadequately sealed door, pose a threat of injury and exposure to the house's inhabitants. Third, the inability to use the kitchen results in the inhabitants not being able to feed themselves adequate, nutritious food, often relying on unhealthy fast food for basic sustenance. Finally, the house's overcrowding results in both the easy passing on of communicable diseases, and in a high stress environment unsuitable for personal growth and development.

"All of these issues are magnified for the youngest children in the household.

"I am shocked by the conditions I witnessed in this housing unit. I cannot believe these conditions exist in Canada. My shock is magnified by the knowledge that these units are publicly owned, and the landlord is the City of Toronto. I think the existence of these conditions represent

a major embarrassment for our society and our City, and they are a major public and individual health concern."

Maintenance at Swansea Mews

Vi describes one of the numerous times she has contacted TCHC for help, "One time I came home last year and called and was told to call [the caretaker] to rat proof the place. [The caretaker] said he wasn't doing it. They sent him [the caretaker] to fix my toilet, he put the tools outside and tells me to do it myself." Several Swansea residents independently confirmed Vi's experiences with the maintenance staff, providing their own similar stories.



Title: Electrical Outlet that causes full power outage in Swansea Mews when someone walked past it.
Photograph: **The Toronto Tribune**

Vi provided more details about her experience at Swansea Mews, "At one time when you passed by this [electrical outlet], all the power in the house would go out." The rodents are a daily problem for her and her family to endure. Vi said, "When I lay down on my bed at night there'll be rats running on my comforter. I'll come into my room and see rats going under the mattress. In my fridge there is a lot of rat droppings. We have to keep dealing with rats."

Three years ago a light fixture caught on fire burning one of Vi's children. It has never been repaired. Vi wrapped a towel around it to prevent further injury to her children.



Title: *Light Fixture at Swansea Mew that caught fire three years ago and has never been repaired.*
Photograph: **The Toronto Tribune**

OCAP vs the Rodents

An OCAP organized news conference was held at Vi's Swansea Mews home on Thursday August 16th. The media were allowed to photograph the deplorable conditions Vi and her children have had to live with for over five years. The second part of the media event was held at 100 High Park. That is the location of the Community Housing Unit (CHU-8) for Bloor West Central. They manage the Swansea Mews Property.

John Clarke, of OCAP, requested a meeting to discuss Vi's situation. A female member of the administrative staff at CHU-8 agreed to meet and also permitted the media to attend. Deryck Glodon, Tenant Services Co-ordinator for CHU-8, loudly demanded everyone leave. He opened the door to the outer office, perhaps not the wisest move with the seasoned OCAP protesters most of whom were in the waiting room, while stating "I am not prepared to discuss this. It is not time to discuss this." Glodon continually asked the protesters to step outside. The tenant has fought this battle for five years. How much longer would she have to wait?

Glodon added, "Any one else would normally comply with this request." Any decent landlord would normally comply with the tenant's requests for maintenance the first time, not let the problem fester for five years.

John Clarke replied, "All we're asking for is a mechanism to meet the tenant." Shortly after this Glodon began loudly yelling "Call the Police."

The Tenant's Protest

What is a protest? Often we hear about them but one is one like? This protest involved OCAP, TCHC staff, TCHC Security and the Toronto Police. All involved because one tenant had decided to declare enough was enough and accept OCAP's offer of help.

TCHC Security vs the Rodents

Officer Bob, and another TCHC Security officer, joined the battle against the pest problem at TCHC. Bob was respectful and came across as a nice fellow. "I will speak to them and try to set up this meeting." He recognized, that "you will have to take me at my word, unfortunately." As much as he was a security guard clearly the tenant's concerns had merit. Who would want to live as she and her children did?

Clarke said, "I'll tell you what I'll be afraid of, I'm sure you're being faithful, the decision whether a meeting takes place isn't really yours. Officer Bob's immediate rejoinder was "Nope." Clarke added, "That's what I thought. In terms of the people running this office what we are asking for somebody who is in a position of management to say I will meet with representative and the family and we'll discuss the situation. It will take place this afternoon or in a couple of days if we could have that much we're happy to walk out."

Bob said, "You'll have to leave that with me and trust me to see what I can do." His offer of help was appreciated.

John described the tenant's home to TCHC security and added, "we feel justified in pushing things a little bit." Bob of TCHC Security responded, "I'll try to work this out. I'm going to try to help you. You've made your point."

Clarke observed the protest was peaceful. "We're not even blocking anybody off." Bob said, "I understand that. I understand all that. I'm asking you as peacefully as you came in, could you leave please." He continued to assure he'd do his best and asked to be trusted and he'd join the protesters outside and he'd stay outside and do his best to arrange a meeting.

Toronto Police join the Rat Battle

At 2:15 two police officers from 11 Division, K. Proctor and I. Sapsford entered 100 High Park. Shortly afterward Sergeant Blain Young, also of 11 Division came on the scene. Sapsford declared it was an impasse and said, "unfortunately if you guys don't voluntarily leave at this moment, I'll have no other recourse but to place you under arrest under the Trespass to Property Act.." He added, "I don't want to have to arrest you today for trespassing."

OCAP and the Toronto Police make for strange bedfellows. Sergeant Young became involved in the tenant's issues, "I'm asking you to go out on to the lawn so I can speak to the Office Staff and my Officers to ascertain as to what's happened." He asked everyone to "please exit now. I will advise you very shortly as to what's going to happen what your recourse is from here on in." The protesters moved outside.

John Clarke, interviewed while waiting outside CHU-8 said he'd wait to see 'if anything would happen at this local level and if not they'd have to move on to the Head Office."

The three police officers came outside after several minutes passed. They took the tenant aside and asked her what her issues were in her home. The tenant went through all of the problems she lived with given the lack of maintenance. Throughout this discussion the senior officer took notes of her complaints.

Sargent Young assured her that TCHC had confirmed the rats would be gone in a matter of days. "On Tuesday they will exterminate the rats. They only do it once a week." One of the first things Young told the tenant was, according to CHU-8, there was no record of her ever having made a complaint. For over 5 years she has lived with the rodent issue. It doesn't pass the smell test. The issue of whether or not the tenant had ever made a written request came up repeatedly in her discussion with the 3 police officers. Vi told them about a recent report and that she had a copy but not with her today. Immediately Sergeant Young replied, "it would be nice to show us that you've done it so we can go to them [TCHC CHU-8] and say smarten up and get it done for you. The rats will get done on Tuesday, I'm telling you right now."

The tenant was concerned she said the maintenance man had said, "he's not fixing nothing." Young responded, "I'll let them know your concerns this is the administration. I don't know if they can do something today. You've made your concerns known." The Sergeant returned to the office at 100 High Park and coming back out and said, "I have just spoken to the fellow [Deryck Glodon] and he says to call on Monday morning at 9 a.m. He's going to put all this stuff into the computer and get a work number. I expressed all of your concerns. You'll just have to keep battling with them back and forth and get it. Best of luck."

Toronto Police Battle with the Rodents: Winner - The Rodents

The rodents were not 'done on Tuesday'. On Monday TCHC informed Vi that her place was 'too cluttered' to have any maintenance work done. It wouldn't be that difficult for her to pack any items and have them moved while the work was done. The rodents own all the storage place in Vi's home. It is their territory not hers. Instead Vi was offered a transfer. Like all of her calls and reports her transfer papers went missing. She'd filled them out hoping for a transfer. Every home Deryck Glodon, who is the Tenant Services Co-ordinator for CHU-8, said was available was in an area of Toronto Vi felt was unsafe for her children.

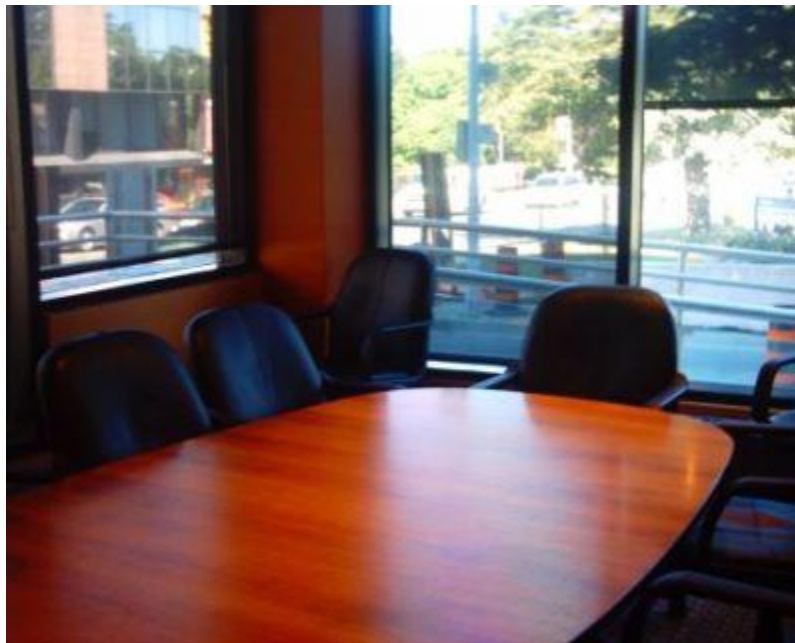
What's truly amazing about this battle is Vi's children. They are well groomed, dressed in clean clothing and polite. How she manages to do this without a kitchen and living with the stench and burden of rodents for over five years is unbelievable. Somehow she had done it focusing on raising her children in difficult circumstances.

Rosedale HQ joins the battle



Title: *Front Door at 931 Yonge, TCHC's Rosedale Headquarters*
Photograph: **The Toronto Tribune**

Two weeks later, on the last day of August, OCAP organized another news conference this time at the Rosedale HQ of TCHC. The interior is resplendent. The protesters and tenant were invited to wait in a small boardroom and eventually the Executive Assistance to the C.O.O. of TCHC came in to discuss the issues. She agreed to arrange a meeting, OCAP's simple request to help the tenant. It shouldn't have taken over two weeks to get a meeting but thanks to the antics at 100 High Park it was necessary.



Title: *Small Meeting Room TCHC's Rosedale Headquarters*
Photograph: **The Toronto Tribune**

The C.O.O.'s assistant returned with Frank Clarke, of TCHC Media Relations. Frank Clarke announced that Vi and her family would be given a 5 bedroom unit to Ms. Miller in her first area

of choice in Toronto. That was fantastic news. Vi and her family accepted the unit and are scheduled to move on October 1st.

Vi's battle is not unique, unfortunately given TCHC's funding battle. The losers are the tenants. This battle has gone on for years. Part of the problem is obvious: bureaucracy.

EasyTrac

TCHC implemented a new system in 2006 after an initial pilot project to help the tenants deal with maintenance issues. One reason for the confusion is the natural time it takes for a new system to take hold. TCHC's announcement to tenants about this new system said, "EasyTrac is a system which is being added to the way Toronto Community Housing handles requests for service and information. EasyTrac will help Toronto Community Housing manage requests for service and/or information from tenants, and provide an easy and quick way for tenants to follow-up on their requests."

The release went on to state, "EasyTrac is a system which is being added to the way Toronto Community Housing handles requests for service and information. EasyTrac will help Toronto Community Housing manage requests for service and/or information from tenants, and provide an easy and quick way for tenants to follow-up on their requests."

Tenants are encouraged, according to Frank Clarke, Media Relations TCHC, to follow up with the CHU office. Vi Miller did this on August 16th and was thrown out of the office along with the OCAP protests. Vi Miller contacted CHU-8 for help. She didn't receive any help. According to the 3 Police Officers the rats would be gone a few days later. It wasn't done! Writing reports didn't work for Vi, the paperwork is missing. Contacting CHU-8 didn't work either. In this case the system didn't work. That doesn't mean it can't work in the future as bugs and issues are addressed.

TCHC was asked repeatedly, was what they would do to address the maintenance issues at Swansea Mews. There has been a positive change. Another problem has been resolved, that of the caretaker that refused to make any repairs telling tenants to do it themselves. The caretaker in question resigned and hasn't worked at Swansea Mews since August 31, 2007.

Derek Ballantyne vs. The Rodents

The TCHC CEO, who works out of the \$6 million dollar Rosedale office, was asked if he would reside in the vacant unit at Swansea Mews, once Vi and her family move, until such time as all repairs are made. TCHC did answer that question, Ballantyne isn't moving in anytime soon. Frank Clarke said, "[Derek] is fully aware of the capital repair needs throughout our portfolio as he has been in and out of units right across the portfolio. For the past five years Toronto Community Housing has been lobbying the senior levels of government for our capital repair needs. We are short \$300 million dollars to bring our buildings up to a good state of repair. The city has done everything it can for us providing up with an annual subsidy of \$90 million and granting us the authority to borrow money, which we have, but now we are at our capacity and it's obvious that we need the senior levels of government to provide us with \$300 million dollars to help us meet our capital needs. On top of lobbying the senior levels of government [Derek]

has personally invited federal and provincial politicians to stay overnight in Toronto Community Housing units to highlight the need because it is his belief that really it is the politicians that should stay overnight in the units to truly see and understand the problem firsthand as they are the decision makers. That's what we have done over the past couple of years and we have had a number of politicians stay and that is part of our effort to highlight the problem to the senior levels of government and as you know there is a tenant lead campaign, lead by TCHC tenants called **Save our Structures** that campaign has been active now for quite some time and they are continuing to pursue the issue with the provincial government."

The Power of Protest: Winner - OCAP

Ultimately Vi Miller's decision to take a stand and refuse to accept this appalling treatment from TCHC worked when she made a phone call. That call wasn't to TCHC. It was to the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty. The power of protest! A group of strangers worked on Vi's behalf without asking for anything in return. But for OCAP's involvement Vi Miller wouldn't have her transfer. Through OCAP, the Health Providers Against Poverty, Security at TCHC, 3 Toronto Police officers and the Rosedale TCHC HQ got involved in the battle with the pests. All these strangers worked together for one TCHC tenant. There are thousands more like Vi who today live in squalor because TCHC and the Ontario Government are in a funding battle. There is no excuse for the miserable maintenance issues in TCHC owned or managed properties. The effort of these groups who worked together or separately for the tenant to get rid of rats is commendable. What is sad is the rats defeated every one of them. They are still in that unit at Swansea Mews. The rats won meaning that unit is still uninhabitable for the present time.