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The Apartment

People living with mental illness often live with constant instability in terms of housing. They move from hospitals to group homes and other transitional housing projects without enjoying the security of a permanent home. L'Abri apartments can put an end to this cycle by offering long-term, pleasant, secure and affordable housing. Once residents are established in L'Abri's permanent homes, they are able to focus their energies on improving other aspects of their lives. The combined comforts of a secure home and a community of support allow residents to gain social confidence.

Much careful preparation, hard work and team spirit is needed to set up and maintain L'Abri apartments, which provide safe and comfortable spaces from which residents can integrate into the community. This chapter looks at how L'Abri finds, furnishes and sets up new homes. Over the years, we have also learned certain apartment-related lessons concerning maintenance, insurance and relationships with landlords.

The Apartment Model

The model developed by L'Abri en Ville of renting one apartment for three residents, has always worked well for the population we serve – stable adults willing to live together and reach out to community.

Because L'Abri en Ville signs all its apartment leases, the organization and not the individual resident is the tenant. The rules governing social assistance in Quebec dictate that two (or more) persons sharing the lease of an apartment will have their welfare cut, even if they receive permanent disability cheques. If, however, they are renting a room from a housing project and not directly from a building's landlord, they will not be subject to cuts. Residents with L'Abri are therefore not financially penalized for sharing a space.

L'Abri en Ville chooses apartments in different buildings and often in different neighbourhoods. Our objective is to

The question may arise: Why not buy a building?

Most importantly, for an organization like L'Abri, having a building would defeat the goal of community integration. In addition, the organization would have the numerous responsibilities of a landlord, including building maintenance and insurance. As landlords, board members and staff would have to dedicate energies and funds to the care and management of a building rather than to the residents. The overhead costs of the project would increase substantially and fundraising would have to focus on providing for the building rather than the residents and staff.

promote integration, reinforce all aspects of normal living, and avoid any possibility of labelling and stigmatization. It is our belief that the lives of our residents and those of the members of the larger community are enriched by daily contact.

Finding the Apartment

While the coordinator is responsible for finding each L'Abri apartment, board members, volunteers and residents often pitch in to help. In the search for each apartment, all regular channels are used to find the best space. The first L'Abri apartment was found by applying to the city's department of housing. Ads in local newspapers and on internet sites are consulted and neighbourhoods are explored for 'for rent' signs. It is often through talking to friends and community members that apartments are found.

Certain aspects of location must be considered. Because the majority of L'Abri residents are English-speaking, we have focussed on predominantly English neighbourhoods. The apartment buildings should be close to public trans-

portation, a grocery store (not simply a convenience store), a pharmacy, and a bank to easily accommodate resident needs.

A general rule for those choosing the apartment is that they themselves could live happily in the space: it should be clean, well-kept and pleasant. Many residents aren't comfortable with first floor or basement apartments for security reasons, so an ideal apartment would be situated on the second floor or above. What's more, the apartments should have balconies so that residents or their guests can smoke outside if they choose to keep a non-smoking apartment. Each apartment must have three separate bedrooms and a shared living room, kitchen and bathroom (popularly termed a 5 1/2 in Montreal). Ideally, the bedrooms will be as similar in size as possible. On the other hand, differences in bedroom size could be turned to advantage by offering residents different rents. Currently (2006), L'Abri en Ville tries to find apartments for under \$950.00 rent per month for a heated apartment and \$800.00 for an unheated space.

With these rates, no resident will pay much more than \$375.00/month with electricity, telephone and cable added in.

Encountering Prejudice in Landlords

Sadly, L'Abri coordinators sometimes encounter prejudice when meeting potential landlords, although it can be difficult to prove. A landlord must explicitly state that he/she will not rent the apartment to people with mental illness in order for any legal action to be taken. This scenario did occur once at L'Abri en Ville when a landlord admitted that the building owners were uncomfortable with mental illness and didn't want community housing within their building. After several unsuccessful attempts to contact the owners and speak about the project, a L'Abri coordinator got in touch with the Human Rights Commission. L'Abri en Ville then wrote a letter to the building owners stating that the Human Rights Commission had confirmed that the type of discrimination they were practicing violated human rights and that we would welcome the opportunity to talk about their concerns. L'Abri received an immediate response from the landlords who finally agreed to rent the apartment. The relationship between the owners and L'Abri has greatly improved over the years. These

originally sceptical owners now offer space to L'Abri when a suitable apartment becomes available.

Certain steps can be taken in order to avoid this type of difficulty with landlords. Remember that landlords may have some valid concerns about the symptoms of mental illness; they may have previously rented to tenants with mental illness who, when not taking their medication, demonstrated behaviour which was bizarre or disturbing to others living in the apartment building. Many housing projects offer no follow-up or support for their residents; in these cases, difficulties in apartment buildings can and do arise. Your group needs to emphasize the supportive nature of your project in a personal conversation with landlords early in the application process. Bring letters of reference from community members, medical professionals, religious leaders and previous landlords (once this becomes possible). Emphasize the advantages for a landlord who rents to your organization: your residents will be stable, the rent is guaranteed and volunteers will

L'Abri en Ville started out as a non-smoking project, but eventually decided this regulation was unfair. A large percentage of residents were being rejected because of smoking. The L'Abri board members and coordinators felt that L'Abri's goal was not to reform individuals but to help them to feel independent. Residents in smoking apartments negotiate, with the help of the coordinator, where smoking will be allowed. L'Abri does encourage residents to quit smoking by subsidizing smoking cessation workshops.

help with general apartment upkeep.

If some landlords continue to resist renting to your group, it is probably best to move on. You won't want to subject your residents to their prejudice. Ultimately, you will form relationships with open-minded landlords who recognize the numerous benefits of being involved with your project.

help with general apartment upkeep.

Setting Up the Apartment

Finding Furnishings

L'Abri en Ville furnishes each of its apartments as much as possible through donations. In the months leading up to an apartment opening, a list of all items needed for the apartment is written by the coordinator. (See Appendix 36) A small list of some particular items is then circulated to and posted in various supporting faith communities, and announcements may be made during religious services. If possible, the first donations your group receives may be stored in the basements of volunteers, board members and/or coordinators. As items begin to accumulate in the months before an opening, it will probably be necessary to rent storage space in order to hold the furnishings until the apartment is found.

Furniture donations will come from sources other than faith communities. Certain foundations prefer to give concrete items rather than operational funding. These foundations can buy beds, washing machines or other large items for your project. Community organizations or service clubs, including the Lions or Rotary clubs, might also provide new furnishings and help with apartment painting and set-up. When particular items aren't donated, flea markets, garage sales and The Salvation Army are good places to look.

While the vast majority of L'Abri furnishings are second-hand, they are all of good quality. More personal items, including mattresses, pillows, sheets and towels, have always been provided new at L'Abri. Over time, as funding for the project has increased, new beds, televisions and VCRs have also been purchased for each apartment.

Moving In

At L'Abri en Ville, a number of people pitch in to help when a new apartment is being set up. As mentioned in chapter 7, an apartment's volunteer team is formed at the final session of volunteer orientation. Once this team is established, the coordinator pulls the group together and the members take on specific roles in apartment preparation such as cleaning, laying shelf paper, arranging furniture and hanging pictures. Board members, especially in the beginnings of L'Abri, have also become involved in the apartment set-up. Before residents move in, the apartment is newly painted, cleaned, and decorated. A key is made for each resident and for the responsible coordinator. Using project funds, volunteers also stock the house with certain necessities such as basic foods, toilet paper, cleaning supplies. (See Appendix 36) Involving the volunteers in this initial apartment-related work gives them a connection to the space, which in turn helps them to connect with the residents once they move in to the apartment.

Furniture is moved in after the apartment is cleaned and painted. Because our budget has grown over the years, L'Abri is currently able to hire professional movers. When funds were more limited, movers were considered an unnecessary expense. With our first apartments, L'Abri rented U-Hauls and volunteers transported furniture. Other community organizations have also been able to help; both Share the Warmth and Dans La Rue have lent trucks to L'Abri en Ville for particular moves. Certain companies might also be willing to provide some assistance with the move, free of charge.

After the apartment is set up, but before the residents move in, all individuals associated with your project, as well as professionals from hospitals and community groups could be invited to an open house. Open houses

allow all those interested to see first-hand what the apartment looks like, without disturbing the residents when they are getting settled. A group connection is created when many of the organization's members meet in the apartment. Allowing different people to see the apartment can also inspire them; they may notice items missing from the home and decide to make contributions.

From House to Home

The process of creating a community for a new apartment begins with the setting up and the open house, and continues to build once the residents move in. To ease the integration process, the volunteer teams should become involved with the residents immediately. On the residents' first night in the apartment, members of the volunteer team could drop by with a pot-luck supper. Depending on the residents' wishes, this event might be officially organized, with all volunteers arriving at the same time, or more informally, with volunteers stopping by at different times throughout the evening. As an introduction to the new neighbourhood, a volunteer might accompany a resident on a grocery shopping trip and/or to a local bank and pharmacy to set up accounts. Beyond helping with the residents' integration, these tasks are good, concrete ways for volunteers and residents to get to know and become comfortable with each other.

At L'Abri en Ville, house blessings are another way to welcome the residents and create a feeling of warmth in the apartment. Blessings are usually held for each apartment one to two weeks after the residents move in. A pastor or rabbi from a sponsoring faith community is invited to perform the blessing. Residents and their families, apartment volunteers and board members are invited to attend. The residents are not responsible for hosting the event; cake and coffee is provided by the board and volunteers arrange the food and clean up. Of course, blessings are only held if the residents feel comfortable holding the event in their apartment. At L'Abri en Ville, none of the residents have ever objected to these events, which last no more than two hours and create a very positive energy in the apartment.

General Considerations

Over the years, as the L'Abri model has grown and changed, certain lessons have been learned or information gathered concerning apartment insurance, upkeep and bill payment.

Insurance

The issue of whether or not to insure each apartment has been debated by the L'Abri board. In the early stages, it was felt that each apartment should have its own insurance policy. Eventually this proved impractical and expensive, since L'Abri can replace stolen or damaged items for less than the cost of the insurance policy. If, however, individual residents want to take out their own insurance policy, they are welcome to do so. The L'Abri en Ville board does have its own insurance policy that protects staff and board members in case of accident or injury and also covers the apartments in case of damage to the apartment property caused by water or fire.

Upkeep

After an apartment has been 'lived in' for a few years, it's likely that some general upkeep will be required. This will include re-painting, often with labour help from men's service clubs. L'Abri has found it useful to have a 'handy-person' as a general volunteer, not necessarily attached to a particular apartment, who can take on minor upkeep jobs as they arise. Occasionally, big items will need to be replaced due to normal wear and tear. In this case, L'Abri will pay for a portion of the item and the residents will split the rest of the cost. (See Appendix 37) If possible, the treasurer of the apartment may collect an extra dollar or two each month from the residents. These extra funds will provide a cushion for the replacement of various smaller items such as shower curtains and garbage pails.

The Payment of Bills

As discussed in Chapter 6, each resident pays a fixed monthly amount to the apartment treasurer, who in turn pays all of the apartment bills. At L'Abri, heating bills (if not included in the rent) have caused the most difficulty in terms of apartment costs. We have found that the residents like to maintain very high temperatures and thus incur large heating bills. Therefore, the heating company should be contacted once the apartment is rented to provide information on previous heating costs. The apartment treasurer will then be able to estimate the cost of the residents' bill. Since residents pay the same amount each month, the treasurer might want to sign up for an equal monthly payment plan with the heating company, so that costs remain consistent throughout the year.

Summary

The simple L'Abri model has meant renting one apartment every year for three residents until we reached the maximum of ten apartments and thirty residents. Coordinators and board members find clean, safe and suitable apartments which are located in pleasant neighbourhoods and near basic facilities (bank, grocery store, pharmacy). Apartment-seekers may encounter prejudice in landlords. This can be countered by the provision of letters of reference and a clear and honest explanation of the project and its advantages. Apartments are furnished through donations from individuals, foundations and community organizations and with items from second-hand shops. Certain items are provided new; all are of good quality. The apartment's volunteer team, along with the coordinator and often with board members, sets up the apartment and helps move furniture. Open houses, first night pot-lucks and house blessings help to welcome the residents. Over the years, general apartment upkeep will become necessary; a volunteer handy-person can take care of small jobs. Apartment-related issues which have been a concern for L'Abri include individual apartment insurance and heating.

CHECKLIST

The Apartment

Finding the Apartment

- ✓ Prepare a list of potential apartment locations
- ✓ Assemble references and project background information
- ✓ Meet with landlords/rental agents
- ✓ Sign lease

Setting up the Apartment

- ✓ Obtain furnishings
- ✓ Organize move
- ✓ Welcome residents
- ✓ Find volunteer handy-person
- ✓ Organize maintenance schedule and other practical issues