

*Flooding causes upheaval for mother and disabled son*

### **Heather and her son Justice's story**

Heather Whitakker is a single mom with a now 15-year-old son named Justice. Justice suffers from multiple disabilities, one of which is a very rare form of seizures. Heather has struggled forever to get him proper care and services because too many are unaware of his disease, known as Dravet's. Last November the person in the apartment above her had a leak, and when they awoke in the morning there was water everywhere. She was able to clean it up before it seeped into everything. Heather notified her landlord, and expressed concern about mold developing in the parquet flooring in the living room. She was dismissed by the landlord.

The following evening her upstairs neighbor's hot water tank leaked and ran down the path of least resistance (as water does) and ended up all through Heather's apartment. They awoke to water above the ankles. She called the landlord for help to clean as it is very difficult for Heather to do this while also caring for her son who requires one-to-one care full-time. The landlord told Heather it was her job to clean up. Heather cleared the water up as much as she could, but it seeped under the tiles in the kitchen and into the parquet flooring in the living room, and much of the drywall in the laundry room was also wet at least one foot up. There was a mold growth situation about to happen without proper remediation. Forty-eight hours later, you could jump on tiles in the kitchen and water would pop up through the grout, and the wood floors in the living room were buckling.

Within several hours, Heather's son, who is both immunocompromised and on oxygen part-time, started developing difficulty breathing. Heather also broke out in a rash on both arms and found the air in the apartment heavy. She packed up her son, the cat and herself and went over to her mom's. They stayed there in a tiny rear storage room. Her mom was threatened with eviction if they did not leave. Heather purchased a small air mattress for Justice to keep him off the floor and she slept on a sleeping bag wedged between the air mattress and the deep freeze. There was not enough space for her to lie on her back. Justice is nonverbal and yells a lot (he is also autistic, and has brain injuries), so this move into new surroundings did not sit well with him, and he was making a lot of noise. That is why Heather's mom was threatened with possible eviction.

All the while, at the waterlogged apartment, the landlord was doing nothing. No industrial dehumidifier was brought in, no attempts were made to dry out or replace floors. At one point the landlord started to claim she did bring in a dehumidifier. Heather stopped her and said, "FYI, my nanny cam came on while you were in the apartment. Turning on a shop vac and letting it run all night with the hose propped into the air does not work as a dehumidifier."

After 5 weeks, Heather had to return home with Justice. New Brunswick Housing was doing nothing to really help her find a new place — even after she offered to go anywhere in the province, as long as it was a larger city with public transit and a hospital nearby. Her son's specialist wanted them to live within a 10-minute drive of an ER. The New Brunswick Coalition of Persons with Disabilities (NBCPD) was doing a lot of advocacy on her behalf — when the housing tribunal was contacted, they said Heather would have to hire her own contractor (she receives \$860 a month to exist on) and have the contractor deem the house unsafe. The minister

of housing said multiple times that a solution was imminent, even though the NBCPD was unable to find a place that was accessible (Justice needs his wheelchair most days after 12 noon as he gets too weak to continue walking) and that would accept his emotional support cat. The environment they were living in was so dangerous. Mold was growing; the indoor air quality level reported daily through Heather's machine was extremely dangerous, and all this was setting Justice off. He was banging his head, yelling, screaming, and more.

Eventually the NBCPD found a place for them in Moncton. Then it had to go through a fight with social development and housing to (1) have Heather's move paid for, and (2) get her, her son, and the cat to the new apartment. It should never be this difficult to find safe housing for a mom and her 15-year-old son who has only a few years left — not because Dravet's limits life expectancy, but because the lack of treatment received for the first 13 years of Justice's life has now limited his lifespan.

Shame on this provincial government. Heather and Justice never should have been in that apartment since May 2023, when Justice was given a wheelchair. Until the water/flood incident, the government had not even begun the process to have them placed onto the move list. Then, when the flood happened, especially with all of Justice's health issues, the family should have been moved immediately.