

Unreliable elevator makes home a dangerous prison

Madeline Mitton's story

Madeline (Maddie) lived in the same apartment in Moncton for over 10 years. She was on the fourth floor. Since the start of the pandemic, the main elevator only worked intermittently. It was very risky for her to head out for groceries or a medical visit because she couldn't rely on being able to get back to her place. There was a small elevator in the back, but Maddie is a bigger woman. She gets scared entering that small elevator. Her original disability was mental health-based (she is bipolar) but she now also has fibromyalgia and requires a walker to get around. Access to an elevator is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Years ago, when she started using a walker, and housing was not non-existent, she should have been moved to an accessible, floor-level unit. On top of this, about six years ago, during one of the lesser hurricanes that hit the province, she like many in New Brunswick went several days without power. This knocks out communication ability when you have a portable phone and/or cell phone, and when you need an elevator to leave. The first night without power, a neighbor raped her, and because she couldn't leave or make a call it took several days until she could notify the police. She was told that because she was a bigger woman, and because it was a "he said/she said" case (and of course, he denied it) that no charges would be laid. This meant each time the elevator was working (to find out she had to walk to the elevator and see if there was or wasn't a sign up saying "out of order") she had to walk past the apartment where her rapist lived, and then return to her place. The landlord was made aware of the assault, as was her Social Development (SD) worker and housing worker. Why didn't they consider moving her to a safer unit at that point?

But no one helped her get to a new unit. Then the elevator started going out for weeks at a time, and Maddie's fibromyalgia was getting worse. She needed to move. She was told this would be impossible. Her mental health was worsening, and she felt like a prisoner. The landlord told her it would be well over a year before the elevator was fixed. This is when the New Brunswick Coalition of Persons with Disabilities (NBCPD) got heavily involved.

It took the NBCPD a month or so to get the ball rolling. A couple letters reminding both the landlord and NB Housing that Maddie has a right to safe and accessible lodging got things started. Within a week, a unit on the main floor became available. At that point the NBCPD reached out to both the landlord and NB Housing and reminded them that per NB Human Rights, they had an obligation to offer her that unit — which she accepted.

Now, how to pay for the move. Although NB Housing and SD said funds were not available to assist, the NBCPD later discovered this was not true. However, as the moving date approached, the status of the funds was not known for sure. Luckily a local church stepped forward to pay 50% of the costs, and a few other community members chipped in, and the total cost was paid. Again, Maddie's fibromyalgia flared. The government needs to start thinking long-term about housing for the disabled, not short-term. The long-term costs of this type of intransigence will bankrupt future systems.