

Housing search for disabled an obstacle course like no other

Martin Lalonde and Sooraya Peerally, Montreal, Quebec

According to the Office des personnes handicapées du Québec, nearly half of people living with mobility problems are tenants, and the majority of them live below the poverty line.

In 2016, more than 62% of people with a disability had an income of less than \$30,000 per year. Faced with a dire lack of social/community accessible housing, in addition to systemic discrimination within both the employment and private housing markets, people with motor disabilities are at an ever-increasing risk of becoming homeless.

People who use mobility aids frequently find themselves vulnerable to the whims of their landlords. People who need home adaptations, for example, are only eligible to receive the necessary subsidy from the City of Montreal program if their landlord gives consent and is collaborative throughout the process. If the landlord refuses, disabled tenants are forced to find another apartment and a new landlord who will accept to have these renovations carried out.

The average wait between application and start of work was 16.8 months in Montreal in 2022. If the building was to change ownership during this time, the new owner can choose to withdraw consent to the subsidy agreement.

It is also becoming increasingly common for a landlord to simply want to get rid of a longtime tenant, to be able to rent the unit more lucratively. Withholding consent for needed home adaptations is one way to achieve this.

Owners can also prohibit tenants from leaving their wheelchair or scooter in the corridor of the building; tenants with a motor disability need a safe convenient place to store their mobility aid.

For all these reasons, many people with disabilities are afraid to refuse abusive rent increases and often end up paying a rent they can't afford.

In the current context of a housing crisis, it's becoming virtually impossible to find accessible or adaptable housing. A large proportion of those that do exist are in recently constructed buildings and therefore very expensive. Larger units suitable for families with a member who has a motor impairment are even harder to find.

We don't know how many people with motor disabilities are in fact homeless, but the many difficulties currently experienced by members of Ex aequo confirm that the problem is real.

Once they become homeless, people with motor disabilities have to also contend with the widespread lack of accessibility within existing community resources: no access ramps or adapted bathrooms, having to leave shelters during the day, and a lack of staff awareness and training around accessibility.

In Montreal, for example, current municipal emergency measures for tenants who fail to find another apartment at the end of their lease do not include any temporary accommodation that is accessible to wheelchair users.

Finally, disabled individuals who do not meet the eligibility criteria for the various existing assistance programs (social housing, rent supplement, for example), will be the most at risk. One example of ineligibility is people who have been in Montreal for less than 12 months.

The Referral Service of the Office Municipal d'Habitation de Montréal (OMHM), responsible for coordinating emergency measures, will only provide a basic list of available housing on the private market. This list that does not include any accessibility information whatsoever.

Because there are always several dozen interested applicants for every available unit, how many landlords will choose to rent to a disabled person?

These individuals find themselves utterly alone without any assistance from the city and the OMHM. No matter the number of housing applications they fill out, they often go months without a return call. During that time they live a life of hidden homelessness, shunted between organizations that provide only temporary emergency shelter, or spending time on a friend's living room sofa, and doomed to fail in their search to find a long-term solution to their need for accessible housing.

Martin Lalonde and Sooraya Peerally are collective advocacy officers at Ex aequo, a Montreal-based organization that promotes and defends the rights of people with motor disabilities.