

Nova Scotia ACORN Tenant Survey Report



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Introduction:

Nova Scotia ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) is an independent national organization of low and moderate income families with 2200 members across the Halifax Regional Municipality Region. ACORN has 102,000 members in 22 neighbourhood chapters across Canada. Acorn believes that social and economic justice can best be achieved with a wide membership base who are invested in their organization and focused on building community power for change.

In 2011 statistics, there were 390,280 private households across the province of Nova Scotia. 29% is listed as renter households. Almost a third of the population lives in a rental unit. (Statistics Canada, 2015)

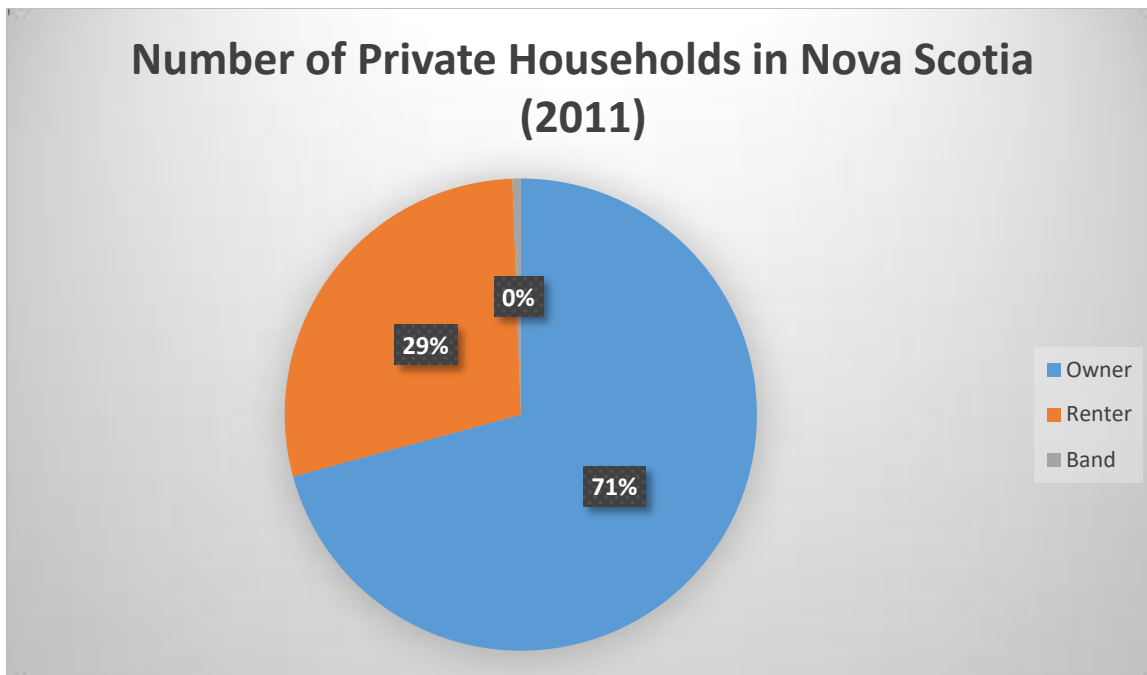


Figure 1 Number of Private Households in Nova Scotia

There have been some bylaw changes made across the province in recent years aiming to improve rental housing conditions. However, as this report will show, there is still a lot to be done on both the provincial and municipal level.

Executive Summary

This survey was conducted from April 30, 2017 to June 30, 2017.

With the help of both small and large stake holders in the results of this survey, groups such as ACORN NS, United Way, Feed NS, the community health boards across the province, housing support workers and many more worked hard to promote and distribute this survey across the province because the housing crisis is province wide and not just limited to one or two areas.

In the space of two months, there were 346 respondents from across the province. Based on the mandatory postal code requirement, we were able to map where these respondents live.

Results from the survey show that there is a lot of improvement needed on the quality of the housing options available to low and moderate income individuals and families. It is noted though in this survey, the majority of tenants are pleased with their landlord but the few bad landlords have overwhelmingly given the landlord industry a bad name.

When given the chance to express their opinion, 61% of respondents believe that regular inspections and enforcement on bylaws would go a long ways to improving the quality of rental units out there.

Do you feel that regularly scheduled inspections by unbiased personal would improve the quality of the rental unit and property?

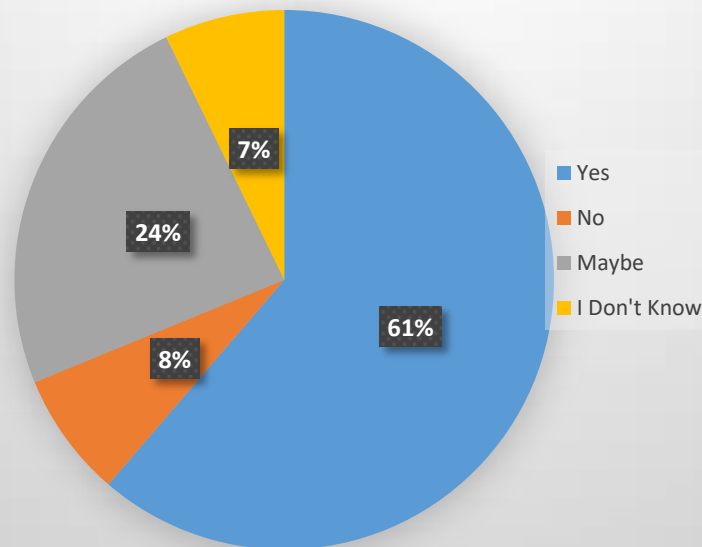


Figure 2 Would Regular inspections improve quality of units

What is Landlord Licensing?

In the current system, inspections of buildings are mainly complaint based. There are many reasons why complaint based inspections do not work. These include: tenants not knowing their rights, lack of education regarding the complaint process, tenants are afraid of landlords and evictions, language barriers, and even tenants eventually becoming unwilling to sacrifice their time and energy complaining after losing faith in the system that is supposed to protect them.

Landlord Licensing is a term ACORN NS is using to promote the idea that landlords be registered and submit to annual inspections by unbiased professionals who have no conflict of interest with the landlords they are inspecting. The inspection would cover common areas, boilers, elevators and electrical systems. These inspections would also check if landlords are keeping up with the cleaning, maintenance and pest control requirements for their region.

Through research, it has come to our attention that local public housing does not fall under the jurisdiction of the municipal government; therefore, the local municipal inspectors do not have the authority to go in and force public housing to comply to local bylaws.

Landlord Licensing will have to be addressed by both provincial and municipal government in order for the legislation to be effective in protecting the rights of tenants to live in safe and healthy homes and landlords to maintain a viable business model.

To enforce this we recommend a series of penalties that can range from financial to criminal for both landlords and tenants.

Methodology

Nova Scotia ACORN's Province Wide Tenant Survey was conducted between April 30, 2017 to May 30, 2017. 346 responses were received. The main principal areas that the survey addressed were:

- Categorical Data
- Condition of Your Living Space
- Common Areas of Building
- Tenant/Landlord Relationship
- Comment Section

The targeted demographic for respondents were low and moderate income individuals and families across the province of Nova Scotia. They may or may not be members of Nova Scotia ACORN. The survey was available both as an online survey and through a paper survey. Those that were filled out on paper were mailed to ACORN and inputted into the electric form. The majority of results were online.

Results

Landlord Licensing will have to be addressed by both provincial and municipal government in order for the legislation to be effective in protecting the rights of tenants to live in safe and healthy homes and landlords to maintain a viable business model.

To enforce this we recommend a series of penalties that can range from financial to criminal for both landlords and tenants. As well as information sessions for both landlords and tenants to educate both

on their rights and responsibilities. Communication between all impacted parties needs to be streamlined and made easier for all to use.

Survey Results

Respondents were given the opportunity to fill out the survey anonymously. The only identifying feature required to be disclosed was the postal code of where the survey was completed. As shown in the picture below, we were able to reach from one end of Nova Scotia to the other.

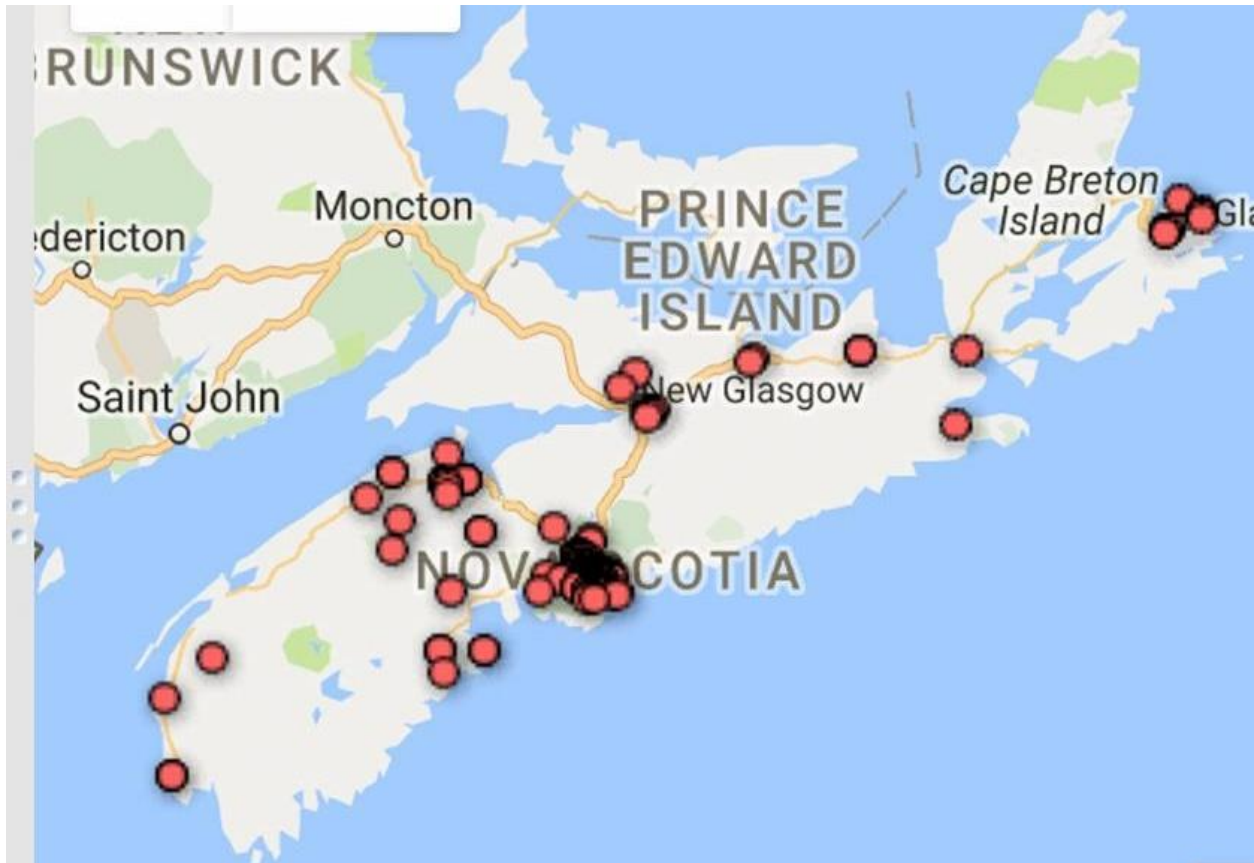


Figure 3 Postal Codes Plotted Using Google Maps

Categorical Data

The four top rental unit types are:

1. Apartment
2. Flats
3. Public Housing
4. Rooming House

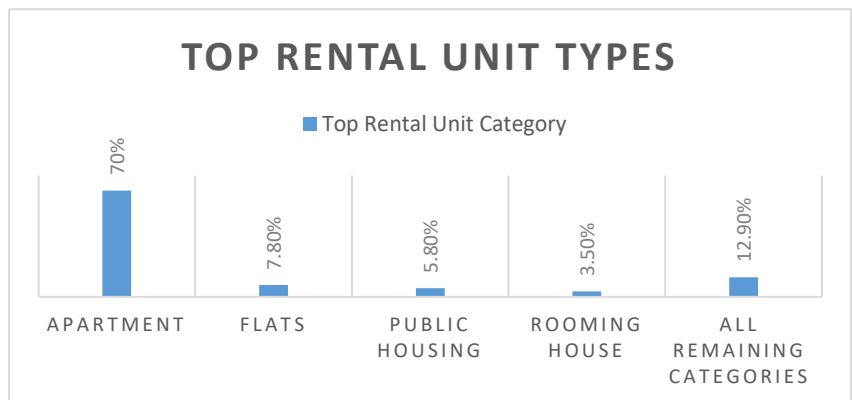


Figure 4 Top Rental Unit Types

Rental costs varied across respondents, but overall, 76% paid under \$999. Only 1% of respondents were fully subsidized.

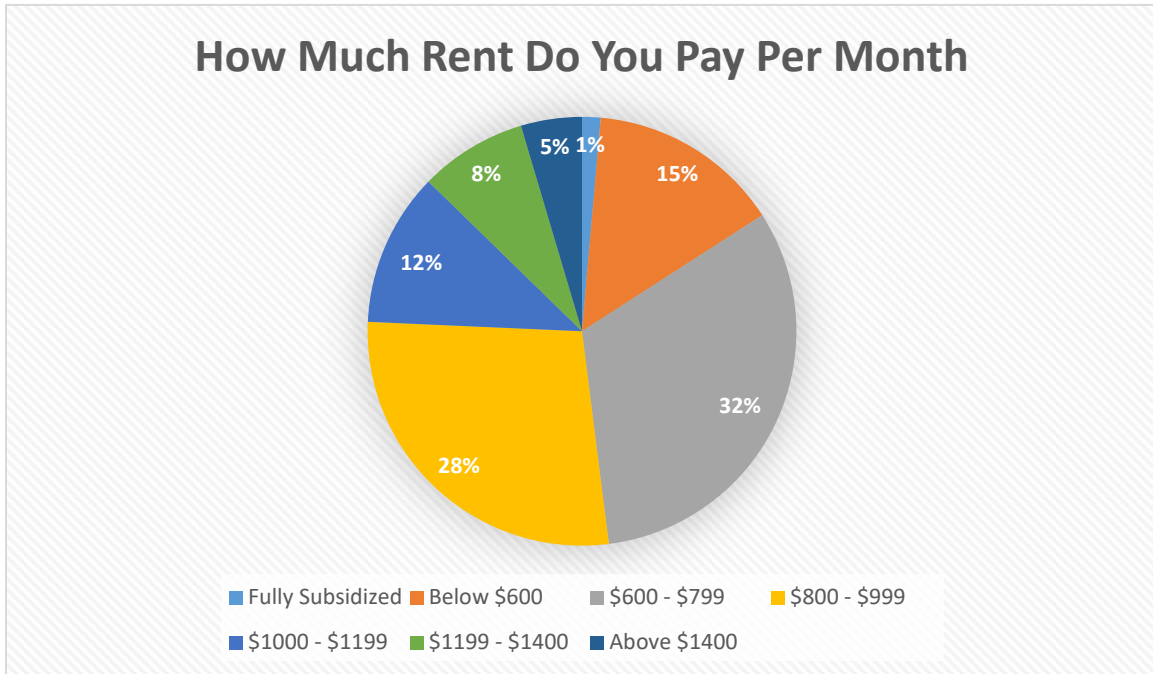
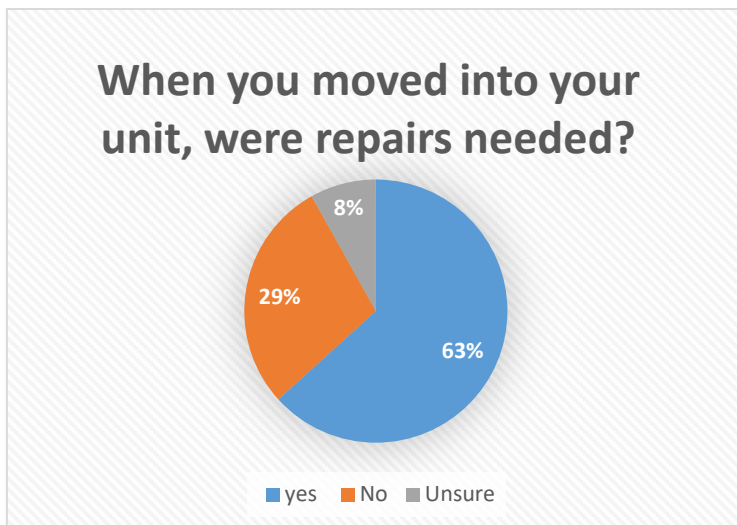


Figure 5 How Much Rent Do You Pay Per Month

The

majority of respondents had a low to moderate annual income, with 71.4% earning less than \$30,000. Of this figure, 20.2% earned \$10,000-\$20,000. For this group even rental costs of \$600 could equate to 72% of people's income who make \$10,000 a year.

The overall average monthly rent for a two-bedroom unit in Nova Scotia's urban centres as of the April 2015 survey was \$980. Halifax CMA was the only centre to report an above average two-bedroom rent at \$1,035. Rents were next highest in East Hants at \$846 followed by Truro at \$789. In the Cape Breton CA, the average rent for a two-bedroom unit was \$739 while in New Glasgow rents stood at \$664. In Kentville and Kings Subd. A. two-bedroom rents in the April 2015 survey were \$677 and \$720, respectively. (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2015)



Condition of Your Living Space

Over half of the units rented required repairs at the beginning of the tenancy, indicating that units are being rented in poor conditions. Even more disheartening is that 67.1% claim that it is very difficult to get those repairs fixed.

Figure 6 When you moved into your unit, were repairs needed?

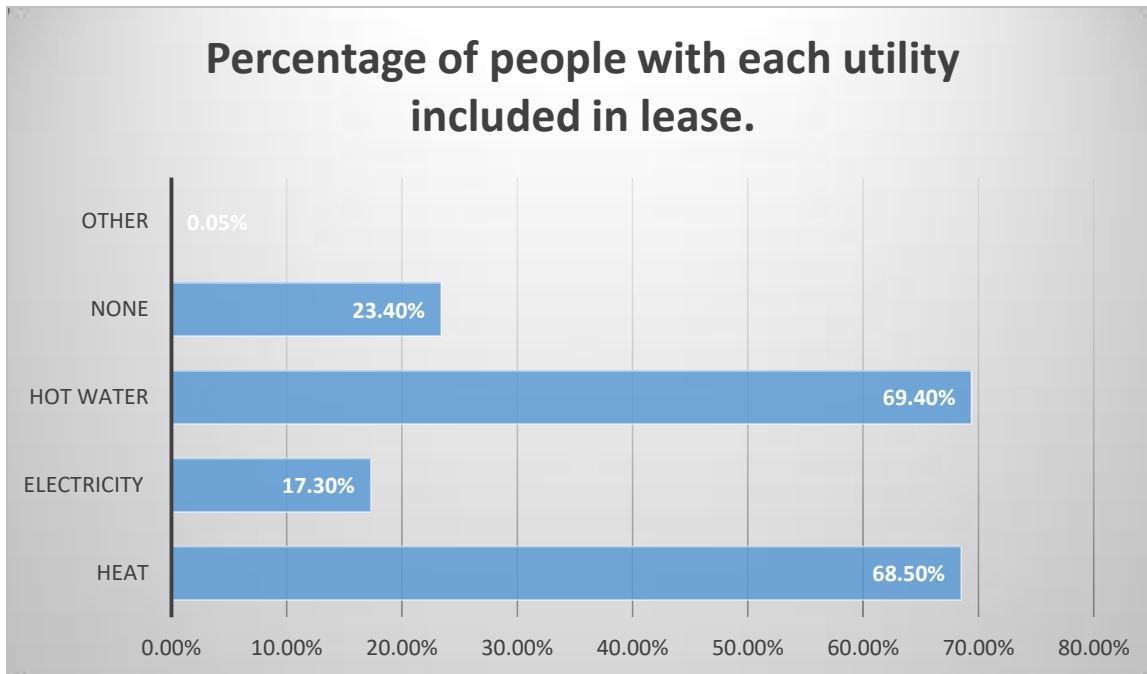


Figure 7 Percentage of people with each utility included in lease

Even though 237 respondents said that heat was included in their lease, 121 people (35%) complained that they have lacked heat in the winter time. Hot water is another concern that respondents have had issues with. The numbers show that even if hot water is included in the lease there are a number of problems that show the hot water heater is not adequate for the rental unit.

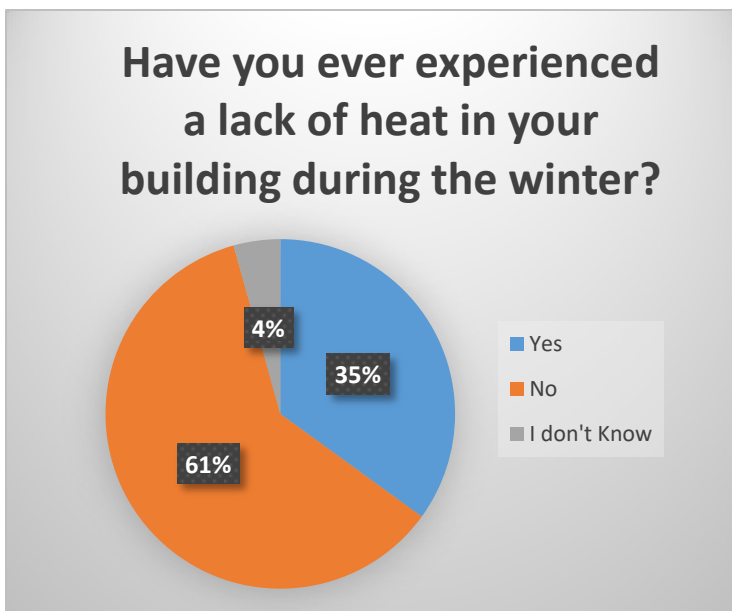


Figure 9 Have you ever experienced a lack of heat in your building during the winter?

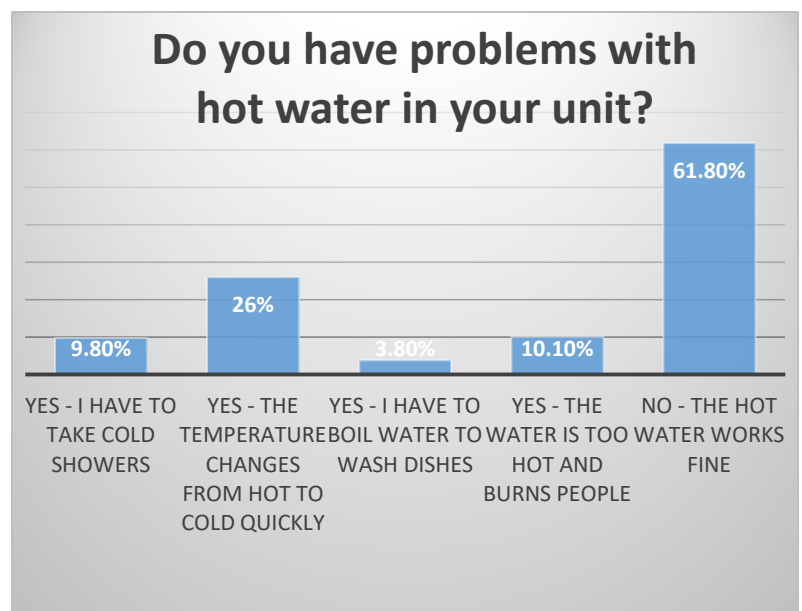


Figure 8 Do you have problems with hot water in your unit?

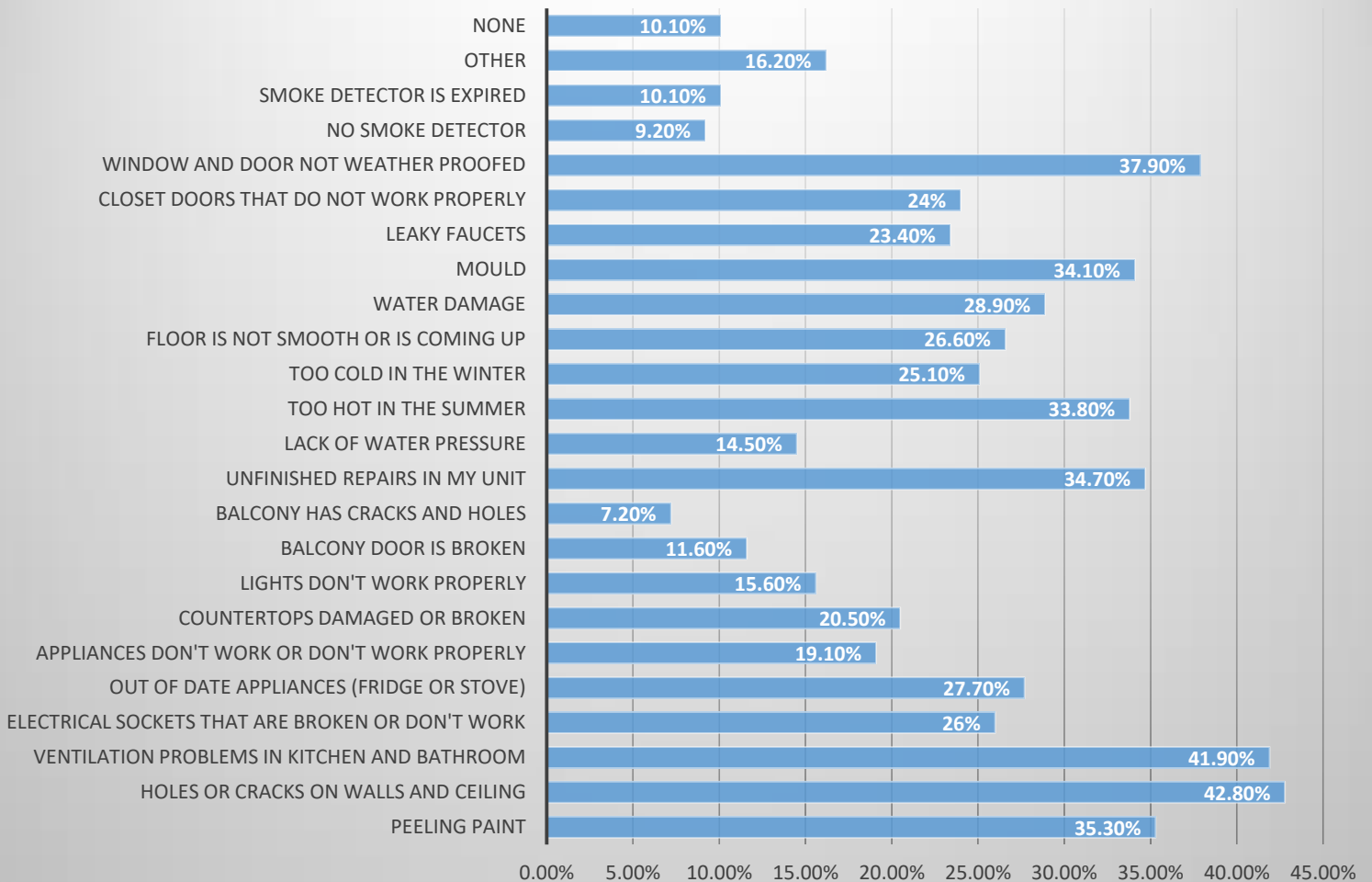
In the Halifax Regional Municipality, rental unit standards are defined by Bylaw M200. When the survey was written and the quality of the units across the province was questioned, Nova Scotia ACORN designed the questions on problems within the rental unit based on Bylaw M200 with the understanding that the bylaw's would vary across different regions in the province however would contain similar standards.

The M-200 By-Law is the minimum standard to which residential buildings, including houses, apartment buildings and rooming houses in Halifax Regional Municipality must be maintained. (RESPECTING STANDARDS FOR RESIDENTIAL OCCUPANCIES By-law, 2016) The requirements of the By-Law include but are not limited to the following:

- Fire prevention
- Structural Soundness
- Drainage
- Foundations
- Windows and Doors
- Egress and Exiting
- Decks
- Elevators
- Stairs
- Fireplaces, fuel burning appliances and chimneys
- Heating
- Plumbing
- Electrical
- Ventilation

The following issues were reported by respondents across the province.

Issues in my unit:



Real Comments by Real People On the State of Their Rental Unit

My ground floor windows do not have window screens and do not lock and in no way would prevent someone from sliding them open from the outside and breaking in.

~

landlord only responds to quick fix calls. when we talked to them about problems with the kitchen sink and counters, they replaced the faucet but the problem was in the piping and the connection to the wall so the problem persisted.

~

*I live above a laundry room. Tenants have 24 hr access. At times this past winter, I've woken to temperatures being 28*in early am hours. I'm dreading this coming summer.*

~

Dishwasher broken the whole time, heat didnt work unless on 30, no cold water in kitchen, laundry machines very dirty and always broken, had to change the door knobs from the balcony to the front door because it wouldn't lock. Still only can lock deadbolt

~

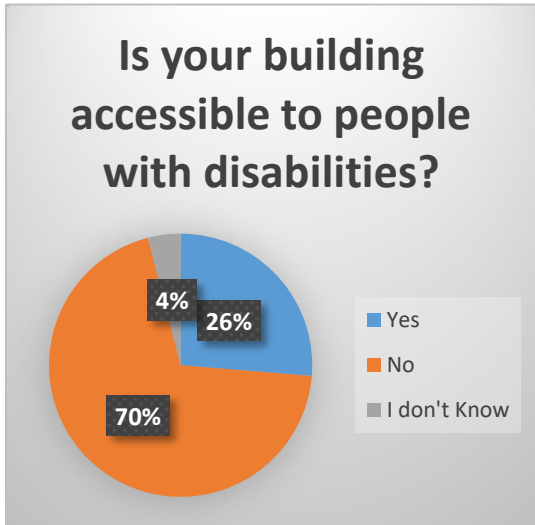
our heat is terrible, no windows in living room, water leaks like crazy in bathroom, needs to be painted, we tried to seal off the cracks to keep bugs out but they are still getting in, rent too high, we are on disability,...this survey-i really pray we see a change in my lifetime.

~

The well water is very bad, highly mineralized and odourous. It stained my clothing, my clothes washer interior, and ceramic and glass dishware. I believe it was harming my pet's health as well. I have to get water elsewhere for drinking and giving to my pets.

~

I would like hot water for once mostly



In 2012, almost 14% of the Canadian population aged 15 years or older—3.8 million individuals—reported having a disability that limited their daily activities. In that same report on disability, completed by Statistics Canada, it is noted that Nova Scotia has the highest prevalence of documented disability of all the provinces and territories at 18% of the population in 2012. (Number and percentage with and without disabilities, aged 15 years or older, Canada, provinces and territories, 2012, 2015) The survey tried to take that into consideration when the respondent was asked if they felt their building was accessible for people with disabilities.

Figure 10 Is your building accessible to people with disabilities?

Of the 346 respondents who completed the survey, 53.5% stated that they live in a building that has three to ten floors. 73.7% of respondents say they have no elevator in their building. Of the remaining respondents only 9% could said that their elevator works perfectly.

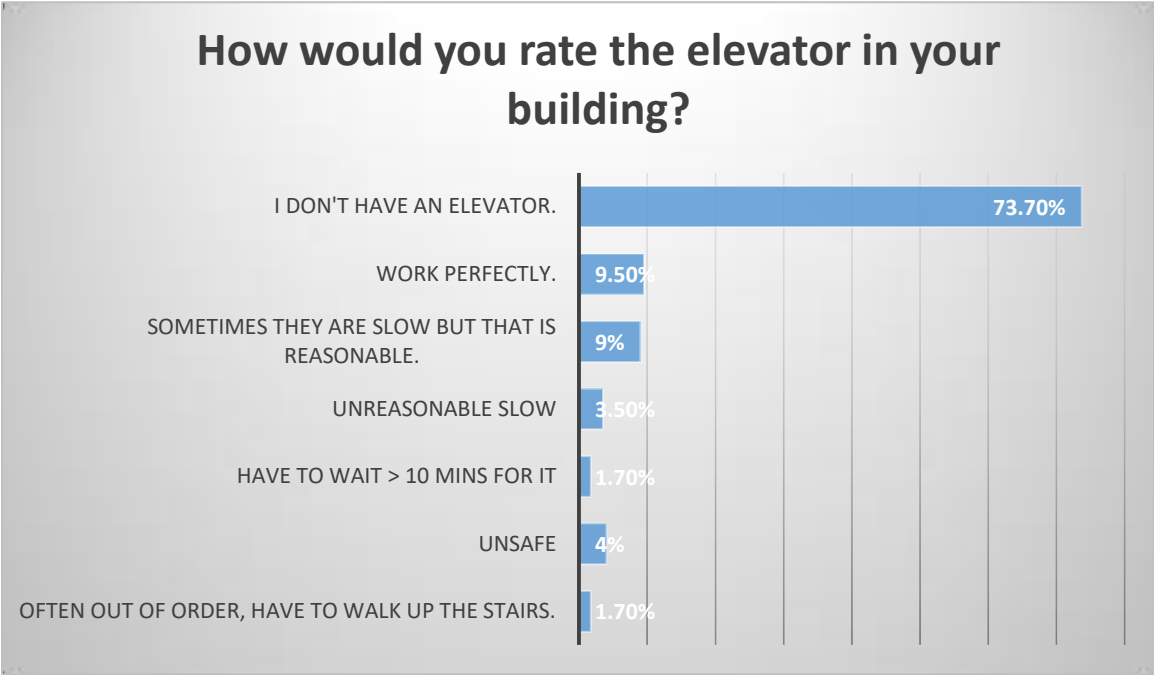


Figure 11 How would you rate the elevator in your building?

Common Areas

The common areas part of the survey were divided into 4 sections: hallway, stairwell, laundry room, parking garage/area. All four of these areas are regulated by local municipal by-laws. In the Halifax Regional Municipality, this legislation is called By-Law M200.

This is what tenants had to say about the common areas:

The doors coming into the building are suppose to be security doors a lot of times tenants keys get broken off in the lock and doors don't shut properly especially the one after you make it through security door. The hallways and Windows are filthy embarrassing when you have company come to visit.

~

Piles of garbage left in the parking garage, parking garage never cleaned

~

The downspout are blocked and there is almost constant water dropping down right where you enter (even on warm, sunny days)

~

However... the front stairs continue to collapse- the entire building is not insulated properly, the furnace has never been cleaned in approx. 7 years- which is disturbing... etc. etc.

~

The two common areas with the most complaints are the stairwell and hallways.

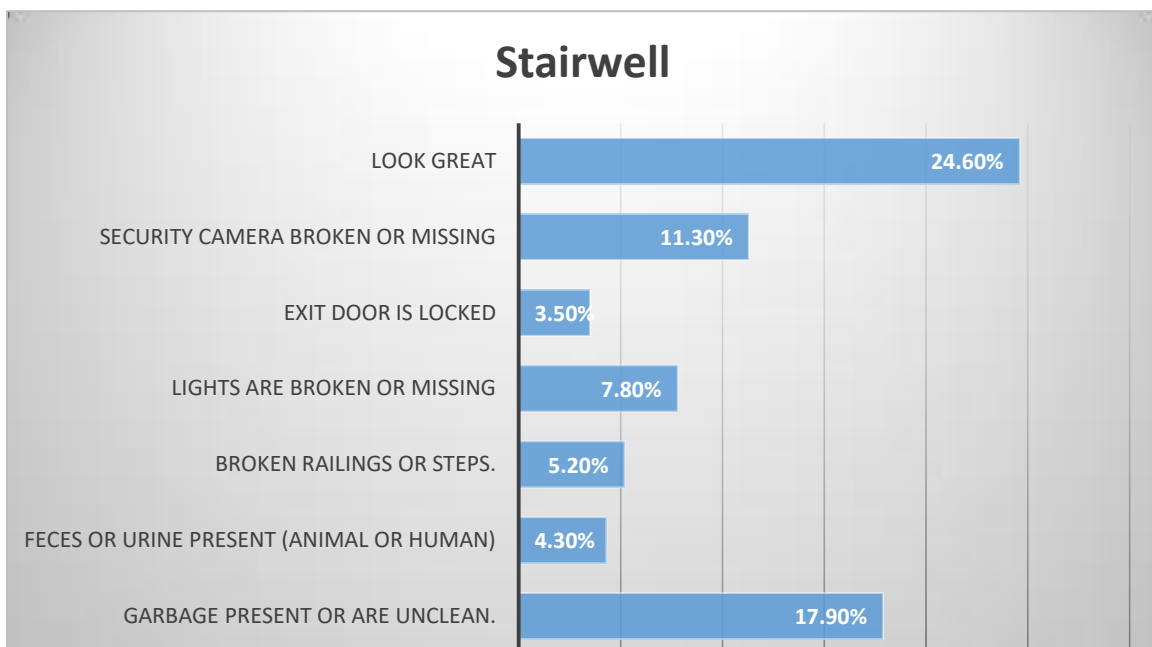


Figure 12 Stairwell

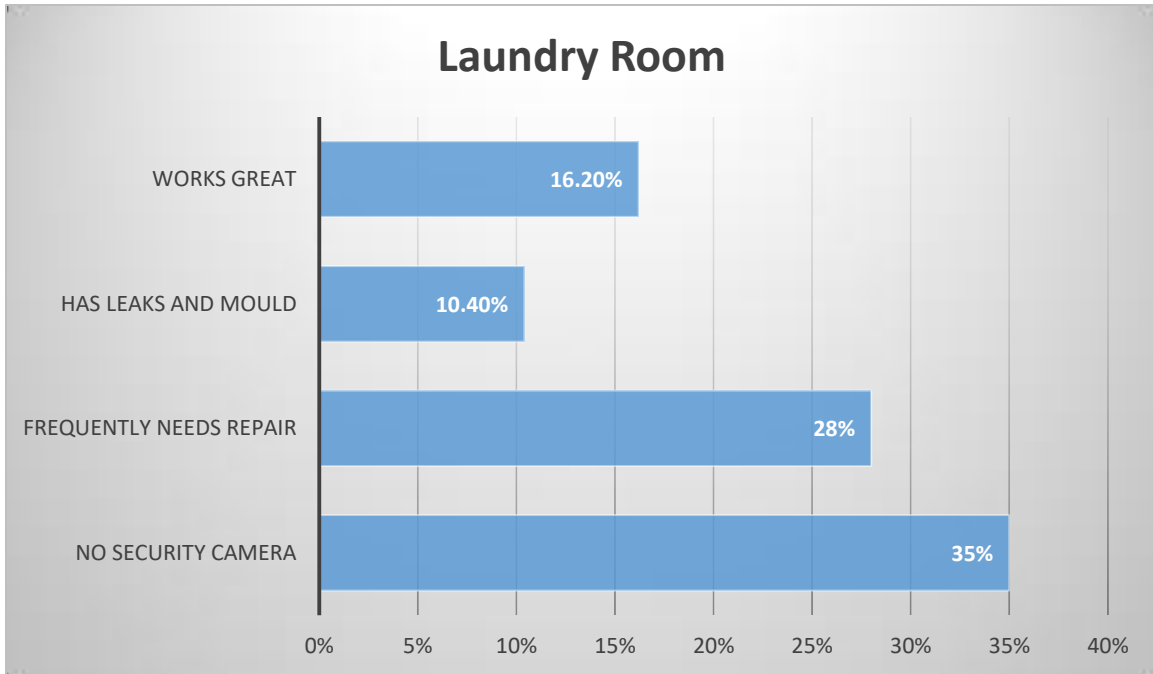


Figure 13 Laundry Room

Tenant/Landlord Relationship

The most surprising results came from the last section of the survey in the tenant/landlord relationship. Admittedly, Nova Scotia ACORN went into the survey expecting the statistics to say one thing but the numbers actually say something else. In every question regarding the professionalism of the landlord and the interaction between tenant and landlord, the numbers support the landlord. Some were quite close but in the end the landlords were supported by their tenants.

56.4% of respondents said that the landlord treated them fairly compared to the 26.9% that said they were not treated fairly. In regards to professionalism, 50.3% of respondents believed that their landlord acts professional. Only 35.5% believed that their landlord was unprofessional in their dealings with tenants. An overwhelming 71.1% of respondents were very clear that they did not feel threatened by their landlord.

This leads one to wonder where this dichotomy has come from. The conclusion reached was that the majority of landlords want to be good landlords, professional and strive to provide good customer service; however, the few landlords that do not have given the industry as a whole a bad name and unless these landlords are reigned in will continue to sour the public's perception.

The building owners will not take responsibility, become informed about, or respond to unreasonable tenants. I believe that a good building (a home) will encourage all that live there to do so responsibly and respectfully. When the building is in a state of disrepair, tenants treat it as such. I do think that happy living goes both ways - respectful tenants and landlords.

Education Component

This survey identifies that there are two separate issues at play here when discussing the housing crisis in Nova Scotia. The first one is the physical problems with the rental unit and the second is the problem with the relationship between landlord and tenant. It is important to distinguish between the two because in our current system they are dealt with by two different levels of government making it difficult to resolve.

In regards to the physical issues, this is dealt with on a municipal level. Each municipality determines the standard of the unit and because there is no uniform legislation it is hard to enforce across the board.

If there is a problem between the landlord and the tenant, the solution to resolving this issue is determined by the tenancy act which is under provincial jurisdiction.

To complicate things further, public housing which is available in all municipalities is under the jurisdiction of the province and can not be held accountable to local legislation on maintenance of the unit.

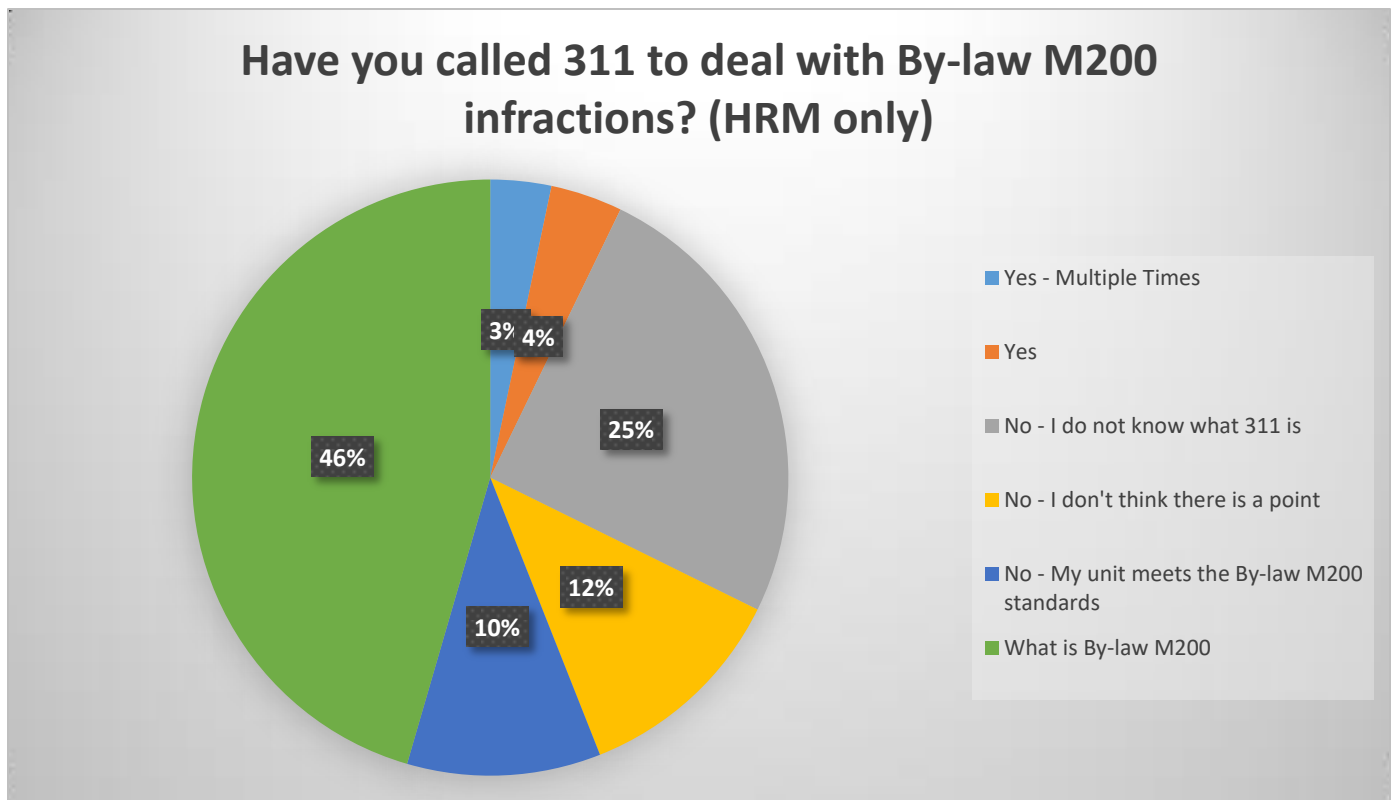


Figure 14 Have you called 311 to deal with By-law M200 infractions? (HRM only)

Have you talked to the Tenancy Board about your landlord?

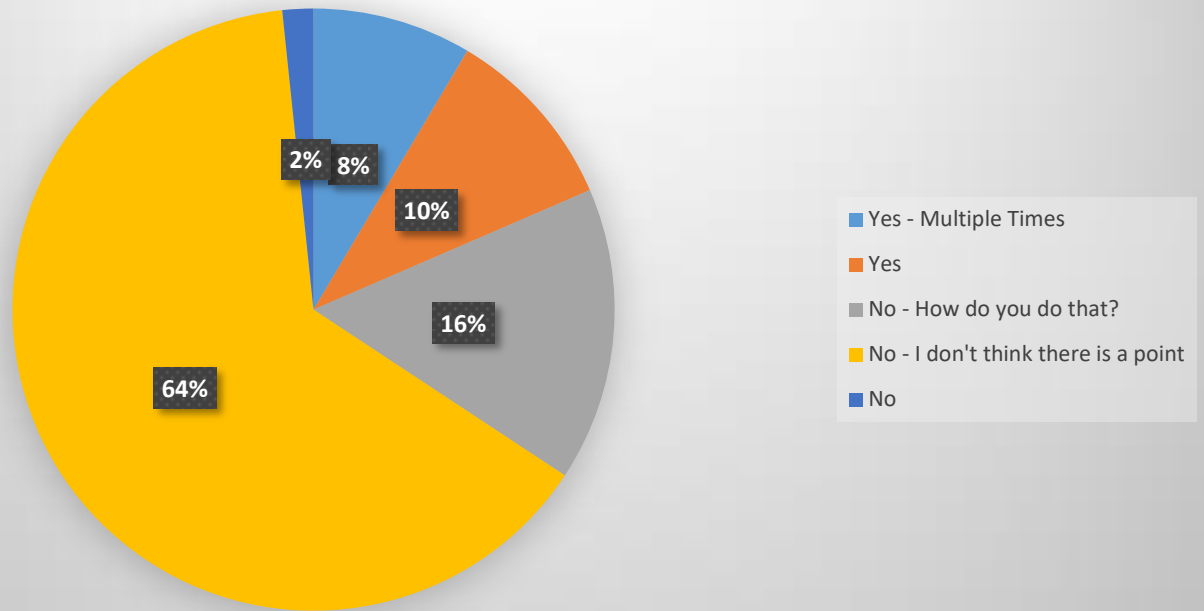


Figure 15 Have you talked to the Tenancy Board about your landlord?

As a result of all of this, Nova Scotia ACORN has determined that education has to be a large part of the solution going forward. Education for tenants on their rights and the process required to get complaints dealt with. Education for landlords on their responsibilities and the options available to them to resolve complaints in a professional manner. Education towards the public to bring to light the issues that our neighbors, friends and family deal with every day to provide themselves with a safe and healthy home. Lastly, education needs to be done within the different levels of government, by the people and organizations with feet on the ground, working with their constituents so that all parties are properly represented within our government.

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