



HNC PARTNER FEATURE: Fostering Preparedness and Community in Multi-unit Buildings

Building Resilient Neighbourhoods' Stacy Barter discusses the *Connect & Prepare* program and how property managers can best support and benefit from social connectedness and emergency preparedness among tenants.



Connect & Prepare is a series of free workshops for groups of neighbours that aims to enhance social connections, shared emergency preparedness, and collective resilience. In Victoria, interested resident “champions” are normally the ones who apply to bring the *Connect & Prepare* facilitators – Building Resilient Neighbourhoods (BRN) and Victoria Ready, the City of Victoria’s Emergency Management Division – to their streets or buildings. However, recently the intake team was surprised to see some property managers either actively apply, or decline to support tenant applications. According to BRN Executive Director Stacy Barter, both situations led to valuable learning about property managers’ relationships to fostering resilient communities in their buildings.

“We were thrilled to see that property managers are becoming more aware of *Connect & Prepare*,” says Barter, crediting the support of Landlord BC in helping promote the program. “And the ones who applied were obviously already attuned to the benefits of social connectedness and preparedness among tenants, which was exciting and encouraging.”

Having the support of property managers is critical for *Connect & Prepare*’s success, says Barter. Property managers have the existing relationships with tenants to help spread the word about the program in a building. In addition, the workshops

can lead to collective project ideas that sometimes require the landlord’s involvement and consent – such as storing a bin with shared emergency supplies in a building common area.

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Nevertheless, Barter adds, “It may sound counter-intuitive, but it’s best if property managers simply ‘enable and support’ the program, but don’t try to lead it.” Resilient communities in buildings, she explains, ideally grow organically through neighbours’ own burgeoning relationships with each other. “For us, when tenants themselves apply to the program, it demonstrates that they’re truly interested and engaged.”

Conversely, then, when tenants are indeed excited about *Connect & Prepare*, and if collective emergency preparedness is in everyone’s best interests, why would a property manager decline to support it?

One common reason, says Barter, is that landlords may imagine that helping foster community in their buildings will be extra, time-consuming work for them to take on.

This is not an uncommon concern among property managers, according to Luna Aixin, Project Coordinator of the 2018-19 [Hey Neighbour pilot](#) in Vancouver, in which both Building Resilient Neighbourhoods and Landlord BC participated as advisors. During the pilot, Aixin says managers came with a variety of different perspectives, from wariness about possible insurance liabilities to excitement from having experienced other cultures where ties among extended families and neighbours are traditionally more vibrant and close-knit. But potential workload concerns were among the most common.

“We reassure them that they don’t have to grow community overnight, their role is just to help sow some seeds and see what takes hold,” says Aixin. “Start small. Host one resident get-together and see if a couple of resident champions emerge. Encourage and support residents in hosting or leading activities.”

Aixin says the pilot project showed that greater community can actually turn out to be less work for landlords rather than more. “Relationships in community-connected buildings tend to be more relaxed or casual, much less stressful,” says Aixin. “And when difficult issues do come up, landlords don’t have to work so hard to build a shared understanding with their tenants.”

Barter similarly says that research and BRN’s experiences so far suggest resilient



communities can help meet many common property management goals. More and stronger social connections between neighbours have long been shown to dramatically strengthen collective emergency preparedness and response. In addition, says Barter, a greater sense of community can increase tenants' positive feelings about their living situation, encourage caretaking of common areas, and reduce turnover. For buildings without a live-in manager, social connections and mutual aid can increase building security, help resolve conflicts, and provide short-term supports or solutions to problems until managers can respond.

So if a property manager is interested in potentially supporting *Connect & Prepare* in their building – either before or after their tenants may have expressed interest – how can landlords learn more?

“We’d love to hear from them!” says Barter. “We normally host a ‘Lunch and Learn’ for property managers and landlords to better understand the program and how they can support it. And then we work with them to put the word out to their tenants. Of course, we’re trying new modes of meeting and delivering the program during the pandemic, too, to ensure everyone is safe.”

BRN believes *Connect & Prepare* has strong potential to scale beyond Victoria, and Barter says they’re actively talking with municipal governments and others about partnerships, while considering different delivery approaches to meet different needs.