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# STAYING HOME

THE ROLE OF RENT BANKS IN ENHANCING HOUSING  
STABILITY FOR CANADA'S RENTER HOUSEHOLDS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an overview and analysis of rent banks in Canada, focusing on their role in eviction prevention and housing stabilization. Rent banks are typically community-based programs that offer no-interest loans, forgivable loans, or grants to tenants facing housing instability (e.g. evictions, arrears etc.). As the first national study on rent banks, this report explores the design and operation of four rent banks in three different provinces, with an emphasis on operational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rent banks stabilize housing by providing short-term financial assistance to individuals at risk of eviction. Unlike for-profit lenders, rent banks do not charge interest on loans or fees for their services. Rent banks also function as support hubs, with staff providing emotional and practical assistance during the application process. Staff members also connect clients to external services like financial literacy programs and legal advice. Despite these similarities, rent banks vary in their funding sources, eligibility criteria, and types of financial assistance. For instance, some rent banks provide only loans, while others offer a mix of loans and grants. Funding can come from municipal, provincial, or a combination of government and non-profit sources. Eligibility requirements also differ, with some rent banks serving only private market renters and others including social and/or subsidized housing tenants. The types of financial assistance, such as support with rental arrears, utility arrears, and moving costs, also vary by rent bank.

Program evaluations indicate that rent banks are highly effective in stabilizing housing for clients. Despite their effectiveness, rent banks face several challenges. Funding instability is a significant issue, making it difficult to maintain programming and staffing levels. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased demand for services, leading to high caseloads and staff burnout. Additionally, rising housing costs and insufficient income make it difficult for many clients to achieve long-term housing stability, highlighting the need for broader policy interventions.

For communities looking to initiate or expand rent bank programming, this report highlights promising practices among rent banks participating in Staying Home that other service providers could explore adopting:

**Eligibility:**

- Developing locally appropriate eligibility criteria that take into account variations in housing costs in different jurisdictions.
- Applying eligibility criteria with flexibility to consider individual cases and exceptions.

**Application and Documentation:**

- Maintaining an accessible application process, including online applications, phone calls, drop-ins, and email submissions, to accommodate various client needs and preferences.
- Providing one-on-one support to applicants in completing the application process and securing necessary documentation
- Ensuring flexibility in the types of documentation accepted to demonstrate proof of income and other requirements.

**Repayment Terms:**

- Accepting multiple repayment processes, for example cheque, cash or automatic withdrawal, depending on client needs helps remove barriers for clients who might face difficulties with standard repayment methods.
- Developing clear and low-barrier processes for pausing repayment in times of financial difficulty

**Non-financial Support:**

- Assisting clients managing a crisis with system navigation, by connecting applicants supports such as housing services, healthcare, child and family supports, social assistance, and food security services
- Supporting tenants with landlord mediation.

**Client-centred Success Metrics:**

- Evaluating program success in terms of housing stability outcomes, rather than repayment rates

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# INTRODUCTION

Rent banks are eviction prevention and housing stabilization programs that provide no-interest loans, forgivable loans, and/or grants to tenants who need assistance meeting their shelter costs.<sup>1</sup> Usually operated by non-profit organizations through a combination of public and charitable funding, rent banks can prevent the eviction of renters from their current housing, support renters who are moving to new housing, and/or act as a financial resource for people transitioning out of homelessness. In addition to providing short-term financial support, rent banks also connect tenants to support services that are focused on increasing housing stability over the longer term. These services can include referrals to debt consolidation programs, food banks, furniture banks, social assistance programs and other government benefits, and other community resources. While there is no one model of rent banks, what unites these community organizations is a commitment to eviction prevention and housing stability through microfinancing tools and connection to wrap-around supports, with a focus on one-time interventions.

In recent years, rent banks have been growing in popularity and attracting higher rates of public investment in Canada. In response, people working with rent banks across Canada came together in 2021 to create the Canadian Rent Bank Coalition (CRBC). The purpose of the CRBC is the sharing of knowledge and promising practices for developing and implementing rent bank programming in different parts of the country. While member rent banks of the CRBC have produced individual impact reports and evaluations, there is little research comparing rent bank operations in Canada (Holl et al., 2015; Cunning Consultants, 2020; Collins et al., 2021) and no central hub for sharing practitioner information and tools.

As a result, there are significant knowledge gaps and a lack of opportunity for service providers and advocates to share information and build promising practices in structuring, facilitating, and evaluating rent banks.

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<sup>1</sup> Shelter costs refer to rent and utilities. Some rent bank models provide financial support for both rent and utilities while others focus support on the rent portion only.

Funded through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Engage Grant, the project, Staying Home: An exploratory study of rent banks as a policy response to the housing crisis in Canada, explores the design and operation of four rent banks in three Canadian provinces to build knowledge of rent banks operating in Canada. The project attends to and compares individual rent bank operations, their histories, assessment tools, lending and granting practices, and funding models. Moreover, as each rent bank has responded to COVID-19, or in the case of Manitoba emerged as a response to COVID-19, this report also highlights programmatic changes made in response to increased housing insecurity during the pandemic, offering opportunities for learning about policy and program making in times of crisis.

This report is one of the first outputs by CRBC, summarizing the findings from Staying Home.



# BACKGROUND

## THE CANADIAN RENTAL HOUSING LANDSCAPE

As of the last census, there were approximately 14.7 million households in Canada, a third of which are renters. The median income of renter households nationally was \$54,800, as compared to \$102,000 for homeowner households (Statistics Canada, n.d.), and more than 30% of renter households were living with housing unaffordability (Statistics Canada, 2023).<sup>2</sup> Stagnating wages (Uguccioni, 2016), precarious employment (Vosko, 2010), the short-term rental market (Combs et al., 2020), financialized landlords (August & Walks, 2018), and trends in downloading and privatization of affordable housing (Suttor, 2016; Haley, 2017) have precipitated a rental housing crisis in Canada. In 2023, 7.8% of purpose-built rental units in Canadian cities with a population of 10,000 or more are in arrears. This is an increase from 6.5% in 2022 and represents more than 179,000 households (CMHC, 2024) that are at risk of eviction. As inflationary pressures and rising interest rates continue to impact the ability of renter households to make ends meet, the financial pressures facing renter households are likely to get worse, not better. Moreover, improving housing security and preventing evictions are important social equity issues. Housing insecurity and evictions are issues that disproportionately affect people experiencing intersecting dimensions of structural marginalization, including economic poverty, disability, and racialization (Levac et al., 2022). Indigenous households are more likely to experience housing insecurity than non-Indigenous households due to the complex histories of displacement, colonialism, and discrimination present in Canada (Levac et al., 2022). Within this challenging rental market, provincial and municipal governments, non-profits, and tenant advocates alike have recognized rent banks as an important eviction prevention tool and an upstream intervention to prevent homelessness.

As of 2023, two provinces currently have publicly funded rent banks operating with provincial coverage (British Columbia and Manitoba), while a third province (New Brunswick) rolled out a province-wide rent bank at the end of the year.

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<sup>2</sup> It is likely that with the discontinuation of COVID-19 income replacement programs such as the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and significant inflation in rents across the country, housing unaffordability is now higher.

At the local level, it is difficult to quantify the exact number of rent banks in operation due to the large number of municipalities and variations in rent bank programming. In Ontario, many of the more populous municipalities have a rent bank program, including Toronto, Ottawa, Hamilton, Durham Region, Waterloo Region, Sudbury, and London. In Alberta, the cities of Edmonton and Calgary both have had rent bank programs. Each rent bank is unique in its funding model, catchment area, and eligibility criteria. Some rent banks provide only interest-free loans to those in a position to repay while others provide forgivable loans and/or grants allowing those who cannot repay to also access some support. Funding for rent banks is as diverse as program design, with some programs funded entirely by the provincial government, as is the case for the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund. Others are funded through a combination of government and not-for-profit sources, like the Toronto Rent Bank and the London Housing Stability Bank. In the case of British Columbia, funding from the provincial government flows through the BC Rent Bank to community partners delivering rent bank programming across the province, and these community providers also receive funding from other public and private sources. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, attention to rent banks has increased considerably, due to the disruption of paid employment for many households, and an increase in the proportion of renter households in arrears since 2022 (CMHC 2023, 2024). It was at this time that the Manitoba government funded the Rent Relief Fund, the Toronto Rent Bank moved to a grant-only model to expand eligibility, and the Government of New Brunswick announced the creation of a new provincial rent bank. Indeed, as renters across the country continue to struggle with rising rents and increased costs of other basic necessities, rent banks are providing considerable relief, with program evaluations in Manitoba, Toronto, London, and British Columbia indicating that they have been highly successful in keeping people housed, with housing stability rates of over 90% following receipt of financial assistance from a rent bank.

# THE STAYING HOME RESEARCH PROJECT

The *Staying Home* project is a collaboration between the Canadian Rent Bank Coalition (CRBC) and a university-based research team. The CRBC was initiated in 2021 as part of a collective effort of rent banks across Canada to create opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing. One of the immediate needs that the CRBC identified was comparative research on rent banks across Canada. As such, an Advisory Committee consisting of CRBC members representing four rent banks and three university researchers formed in April 2021 to co-plan a community-engaged research process for documenting the practices of rent banks across Canada. The Advisory Committee oversaw the preparation and submission of a successful funding application (Dec. 2021), including a research and knowledge mobilization plan. A goal of the research was to provide a multi-level analysis of rent banks. As such, data collection targeted senior staff, frontline staff, and rent bank users at four rent banks across Canada: two province-wide rent banks (the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund and the BC Rent Bank), and two municipal rent banks in Ontario (the London Housing Stability Bank and the Toronto Rent Bank).

The *Staying Home* research project had three research phases: research initiation, data collection, and data analysis. As a community-engaged research project, each phase was guided by the advisory committee including representatives from each participating rent bank, benefitting from the knowledge and expertise that practitioners hold about rent banks specifically and housing stability more broadly.

Research Initiation: Once funding was received, the Advisory Committee began meeting every four to eight weeks to provide input on the design of the research process. Advisory Committee members worked with researchers to develop three interview guides: a guide for scoping interviews with senior rent bank staff, an interview guide for staff interviews with frontline rent bank staff, and an interview guide for rent bank users.

Interview guides included qualitative, open-ended questions to encourage interview participants to provide specific and detailed information about their knowledge of, and experience with, rent banks.

In addition, the Advisory Committee oversaw the creation of a document analysis strategy to identify key documents relevant to the research, including program guidelines, budgets, and funding agreements. Once the research instruments were fully developed, the research team obtained Research Ethics Board (REB) approval from each university associated with the project.

Data Collection: The research team first conducted scoping interviews with senior staff members lasting 60–90 minutes. The scoping interviews were designed to obtain detailed information about institutional policies and procedures and to provide the research team with a strong baseline understanding of the operation of the rent banks. The second stage of data collection involved site visits to each of the rent banks and interviews with staff and clients at each rent bank. Clients and staff were offered an opportunity to participate in an in-person or virtual interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Most interviews were conducted in the same month as the site visit. Due to a failure of the audio-recording technology, three client interviews and one staff interview were redone in December 2022 and January 2023.

**Table 1: Staying Home Data Collection Overview**

Rent bank	Site visit location	Site visit timing	# client interviews	# staff interviews
Manitoba Rent Relief Fund	Winnipeg	Jun 2022	22	17
BC Rent Bank	Vancouver	Aug 2022		
Toronto Rent Bank	Toronto	Sept 2022		
Housing Stability Bank	London	Oct 22		

By combining multiple knowledge sources—rent bank documentation, scoping interviews with senior staff, staff interviews, and client interviews—the research team aimed to gain a thorough understanding of the operations of each rent bank as well as any areas where official policies and procedures differed from practices on the ground.

Data analysis: Once data collection was completed, the university research team developed a thematic codebook for the staff interviews and client interviews. All interviews were coded according to the relevant codebook. The staff codebook included 30 codes grouped under seven themes: initial application, decision-making, after application, staff emotions, institutional matters, landlord–tenant relations, and other. The codebook for senior staff was the same as for frontline staff with three additional codes: staff management, government relations, and institutional history. The codebook for clients included 22 codes grouped under four themes: discovering the rent bank, accessing the rent bank, using rent bank services, and other. Once data was coded, each theme was summarized by the research team, with attention paid to common issues as well as key divergences between rent banks. Summaries of initial findings were shared with the Advisory Committee to solicit feedback and further assess the credibility of the data.

# FINDINGS

## *A. Rent Bank Profiles*

The four rent banks reviewed for this report—the Toronto Rent Bank, the London Housing Stability Bank, the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund, and the BC Rent Bank—all share common characteristics in their goals, structures, and approaches to housing stability and eviction prevention. There are also important differences between rent banks. For an overview of similarities and differences among the rent banks considered in this study, see Table 2. All the rent banks participating in this study describe themselves as providing one-time financial assistance with the primary goal of stabilizing the housing of applicants. Consistent with the primary goal of stabilizing housing, applicants must demonstrate that beyond the one-time funding provided through the rent bank, they can meet their ongoing housing costs through existing, or anticipated, income. Similarly, as programs jointly funded and administered by government and not-for-profit sectors, rent banks provide an important contrast to private lender options for low-income households struggling with debt and financial payments. In contrast to private lenders, none of the rent banks we studied charge interest for loans, nor do they charge a fee to access rent bank services, and the repayment terms include opportunities for deferral and renegotiation as needed, to support grant and loan recipients in maintaining housing stability. All rent banks describe flexibility in application and repayment processes, with the goal of providing individualized support to applicants. Finally, beyond financial assistance, all the rent banks reviewed connect applicants with non-financial supports, which vary depending on client needs, including housing services, health care services, child and family supports, social assistance, and food security supports, among others.

While there are several similarities across rent banks in mandate, structure, and operation, there are also important differences. Some of the rent banks reviewed in this report provide only loans, some provide a combination of loans and grants, and some provide only grants. Some are funded provincially, some municipally, and others through a combination of government and not-for-profit partners.

While all rent banks we explored serve private market renters—and most permit people living in social housing to apply—others exclude applications from certain types of social housing. Below, in Table 2, is a more detailed discussion of the similarities and differences among rent banks in terms of eligibility criteria, funding, application process, and outreach support.<sup>3</sup>

<b>Name of rent bank</b>	Toronto Rent Bank	London Housing Stability Bank	Manitoba Rent Relief Fund	BC Rent Bank
<b>Catchment area</b>	City of Toronto	City of London	Province of Manitoba	Province of British Columbia
<b>Year established</b>	1998	2014	2021	2019
<b>Funders</b>	Municipality	Municipality, not-for-profits	Province	Province
<b>Administration</b>	Hub and spoke, central agency works with local partners	Centralized, single agency responsible for intake	Centralized, single agency responsible for intake	Hub and spoke, central agency works with local partners

<sup>3</sup> In this discussion, although some rent banks also provide funds for utility payments, we explore only eligibility requirements and funding available for rental arrears, first and/or last month's rent, and/or rental deposits.



**Table 2: Profile of *Staying Home* Partner Rent Banks**

<b>Financial needs met</b>	Rental arrears, first and/or last month's rent	Rental arrears, utility arrears, first and/or last month's rent	Rental arrears, utility arrears, first and/or last month's rent, moving costs, damage deposits	Rental arrears, first and/or last month's rent, utility arrears, pet and damage deposits
<b>First point of contact</b>	Phone call to a pre-screening call centre	Online application or phone call	Online application, phone call, drop-in, fax, email	Online application, phone call, or drop-in
<b>Maximum funds (2023)</b>	\$4000 or 3 months of rent; for rent deposit: \$1,500 for a bachelor unit; \$1,700 for a 1-bedroom unit; \$1,900 for a 2-bedroom unit; and \$2,100 for a 3-bedroom unit.	2 months actual rent, plus administrative fees related to eviction	\$2500 or 2 months rent, whichever amount is lower	Up to \$3500; maximum is set by the local partner based on market rental rates.

**Table 2: Profile of *Staying Home* Partner Rent Banks**

<p><b>Type of financial assistance</b></p>	<p>Prior to March 2020: interest-free loans; after March 2020: grants</p>	<p>Interest-free loans or grants for utilities and rent for those on a fixed income</p>	<p>Interest-free loans</p>	<p>Interest-free loans; grants in select locations.</p>
<p><b>Party receiving payment</b></p>	<p>Landlord</p>	<p>Landlord, utility provider</p>	<p>Landlord, utility provider, vendor (e.g., for moving costs)</p>	<p>Landlord, utility provider</p>
<p><b>General eligibility requirements, shared across rent banks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resident of, or moving to, geographic area covered by rent bank</li> <li>• Demonstrate risk of eviction and/or homelessness (for housing assistance)</li> <li>• Regular income source or anticipated regular income source</li> <li>• Capacity to repay a loan, where required</li> <li>• Household income at or below program maximums</li> </ul>			
<p><b>Eligibility requirements specific to individual rent banks</b></p>	<p>Paying market rent; unit covered by the Residential Tenancies Act; RRSP &lt;\$6,000</p>	<p>Eviction notice for arrears, adult or emancipated minor</p>	<p>Owe 2 months or less in arrears at time of application, adult or emancipated minor</p>	<p>Owe 2 months or less in arrears at time of application, adult or emancipated minor</p>

**Table 2: Profile of *Staying Home* Partner Rent Banks**

<b>Housing types eligible</b>	Unsubsidized rental units that are covered by the Residential Tenancies Act	All types of rental housing	All types of rental housing, except public housing directly managed by the province	All types of rental housing
<b>Security of tenure requirements</b>	Mediated agreement with landlord (eviction in process), accepted rental application or forthcoming rental agreement (first and/or last)	Rental lease (arrears), accepted rental application or forthcoming rental agreement (first and/or last)	Rental lease (arrears), mediated agreement with landlord (eviction in process), accepted rental application or forthcoming rental agreement (first and/or last)	Rental lease (arrears), accepted rental application or forthcoming rental agreement (first and/or last)
<b>Application decisions</b>	Case workers at partner agencies complete applications, manager at lead agency reviews and approves	Case workers prepare applications and make recommendations, managers approve applications	Case workers prepare applications, managers approve applications	Case workers prepare and approve applications, submit to manager or review committee for final approval

**Table 2: Profile of *Staying Home* Partner Rent Banks**

<b>Appeals process</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Other services connected with</b>	N/A	Utility programs, food support, financial counselling	Social assistance, community financial helpline, housing support services, family and youth services, food banks, utility programs	Utility programs, food/clothing /furniture supports, debt consolidation , financial counselling

*B. Eligibility Criteria and Required Documentation*

This section explores the eligibility criteria for each rent bank. Generally, rent banks target low- and moderate-income tenants whose housing can be stabilized by short-term financial assistance. Rent banks cannot be accessed by any renter or prospective renter. To access a rent bank, applicants must meet several eligibility criteria related to financial need and risk of eviction. Different rent banks apply these criteria in different ways.

Financial eligibility

Rent banks are primarily intended for low-income renter households, with most rent banks using established low-income measurement tools used in means-tested social programming to determine eligibility.<sup>4</sup> In the case of the BC Rent Bank, the rent bank and its partners use the BC Housing Income Limit (HIL). The HIL differentiates the category of “low income” by geographic area to recognize disparities in housing costs across the province, and number of bedrooms, presumably as a proxy for family size.

<sup>4</sup> These numbers are based on the 2023 amounts.

With the Toronto Rent Bank, the income maximum for eligibility depends on household size, with \$46,500 the annual net income maximum for a single individual, and \$91,300 the maximum for a family of seven. The Manitoba Rent Relief Fund uses the provincial Program Income Limit (PIL) cut-off rates, which vary depending on household size and geography, to a maximum household income of \$63,450 for a household without dependents and \$84,600 for a household with dependents. Finally, the London Housing Stability Bank follows Ontario's Low-Income Measure (LIM), which ranges from \$28,000 to \$52,000, depending on family size.

The demonstration of financial sustainability is a component of all rent bank application processes. For example, applicants to the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund must demonstrate that they “have a reasonable likelihood” of maintaining their tenancy on an ongoing basis as a result of financial assistance received through the fund. As a component of financial sustainability, all applicants must demonstrate that they have, or anticipate having in the near future, adequate income to support their tenancy. In Toronto, which provides exclusively grants, income must exceed expenses with some exceptions; however, for all other programs considered in this study, the tenant must demonstrate sufficient income to repay any loan portion of assistance, albeit in very small amounts. The research conducted for Staying Home found repayments to be as low as \$20 a month, with ample opportunity to skip payments with advanced notice.

While all rent banks work closely with applicants and offer flexibility, applications are denied due to enduring financial hardship. For example, a client who was denied a loan reported to the research team that the rent bank staff stated: “Sorry, we can't approve you because based on the bills that you have and everything that's in your, in your bank, we just don't think that you guys are a good fit to pay it back.” This client's experience speaks to the overall goal of most rent banks, which is to support sustainable tenancies through short-term, often one-time financial support.

In addition to demonstrated financial need and, except for Toronto, the ability to repay any loan amount, financial eligibility may also depend on the source of income.

In the case of the Toronto Rent Bank, social assistance recipients (those accessing Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program) are not eligible for rent bank programs. Instead, in the City of Toronto, social assistance recipients are eligible for the separate Housing Stability Benefit. The Housing Stability Benefit, like the Toronto Rent Bank, provides financial support to tenants for last month's rent and rental arrears. However, the amount of funding available to social assistance recipients through the Housing Stability Benefit is less than the that offered by the Toronto Rent Bank. As a result, social assistance recipients receive less housing assistance than non-social assistance recipients. In contrast, in London, the Housing Stability Benefit for provincial social assistance recipients is wrapped into the operations of the London Housing Stability Bank, so regardless of income source applicants are eligible for assistance through the same program. Similarly, in the case of Manitoba and British Columbia, receiving provincial social assistance does not automatically exclude a person from eligibility for rent bank assistance, although the very low rates of social assistance in both provinces could make repayment appear very difficult or impossible, and therefore render social assistance recipients ineligible for a loan. Finally, financial eligibility is sometimes dependent on the amount of arrears owed. For example, both the BC Rent Bank and the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund outline that applicants cannot be more than two months of rent in arrears at the time of their application. Where rental arrears far outstrip financial assistance, the assistance can be denied because it is likely the applicant will be evicted with or without rent bank assistance, and so the provision of this assistance will not contribute to housing stability for the applicant.

#### Eligible Types of Housing and Security of Tenure

Across all Staying Home rent banks studied, there are some common requirements concerning the type of housing eligible for assistance. Importantly, rent bank assistance is targeted towards tenants, not homeowners. In the cases of the London Housing Stability Bank and BC Rent Bank, all types of rental housing are eligible for assistance. In Manitoba, tenants living in housing directly managed by the province are excluded from rent bank support, but tenants living in other forms of non-market housing are eligible. In the case of the Toronto Rent Bank, tenants must be living in unsubsidized housing covered by the Residential Tenancies Act and paying private market rental rates.

Beyond financial eligibility, tenants must typically demonstrate security of tenure: that they have legal protections from arbitrary eviction. In the case of applications for assistance with rental arrears, the London Housing Stability Bank, BC Rent Bank, and Manitoba Rent Relief Fund have typically required tenants to have a lease agreement that they can provide to the rent bank. The Toronto Rent Bank will work with clients who do not have a lease agreement but fulfill other requirements to demonstrate security of tenure and/or that the rental unit is protected by residential tenancy laws. In the case of all rent banks, applicants transitioning to new housing and seeking assistance with first and/or last month's rent, or a damage deposit, must provide evidence of an accepted housing application or forthcoming lease. Among the clients we spoke to, this requirement did create barriers to securing support for first and last month's rent. In the current rental market, there is considerable competition for units, especially those that are more modestly priced. To secure a unit, tenants are often required to provide first and last month's rent when applying or when the lease is signed. Two participants, accessing different rent banks to help them with the financial burden of securing a unit, spoke about the challenges associated with coordinating between a prospective landlord and a rent bank. The requirement that a lease be provided before funds are released to a landlord resulted in at least one participant struggling to secure a unit while another had to rely on assistance from a family member. Rent banks can and do write letters to prospective landlords confirming assistance but the reluctance of some landlords to rent to lower-income tenants, coupled with delays in receiving a rental deposit, creates barriers for tenants seeking to use rent bank funds to secure new rental housing.

### Eviction proceedings

In addition to finances, lease, and type of unit, those applying for assistance with rental arrears that threaten a tenancy can have their eligibility impacted by the stage of eviction proceedings. In the case of the London Housing Stability Bank, applicants applying for arrears support must typically have an eviction notice. This notice helps to demonstrate that tenants meet the condition of being at risk of eviction. In contrast, none of the other rent banks require an eviction notice for applicants to request assistance for rental arrears, though some assign higher priority to cases where an eviction notice has been filed.



If eviction proceedings have been initiated, the Toronto Rent Bank and Manitoba Rent Relief Fund require landlords to demonstrate willingness to halt eviction proceedings before financial assistance will be provided, to ensure that the assistance will stabilize housing for the applicant.

### Documentation

To demonstrate that eligibility requirements are being met, applicants must submit documentation, the type and amount of which varies slightly from rent bank to rent bank. There are, however, some common documentation requirements that applicants are required to provide, such as personal identification, proof of income, a lease agreement, proof of rental application if applying for security deposit support, proof of arrears if applying for arrears assistance, etc. Often the rent bank will also require two or more months of bank statements from applicants.

What an assessment of the eligibility criteria demonstrates is that rent banks intervene at particular moments in a tenancy, either at the very beginning of a tenancy or when a tenant is at demonstrated risk of eviction. In some cases, those who already have access to state-provided support, such as social assistance or subsidized housing, are ineligible. Where an applicant is not eligible, rent bank staff will provide support accessing those services that are available to the individual.

Rent banks, while serving populations that face significant hardships as a result of the high cost of rent, utilities, and other necessities of daily life, do not target those experiencing the greatest financial hardship as represented by the requirement of the ability to secure a lease, the ability to repay any loan portion, and/or, in the case of Toronto, the exclusion of those accessing social assistance and/or subsidized housing.

### *C. Money Matters*

#### Amount of Financial Assistance

There is substantial variation in the maximum amount of financial assistance provided by each rent bank. The BC Rent Bank has a maximum amount of assistance of \$3500, without linking this amount to a monthly rent change. The Toronto Rent Bank has an absolute maximum of \$4000 for rental arrears, with maximum amounts for first and/or last month's rent linked to the number of bedrooms in the rental unit.

In contrast, the London Housing Stability Bank does not have a maximum amount, but rather, in cases of rental arrears, bases the maximum amount of financial assistance on the actual cost of two months of rent plus any filing fees. When the applicant is seeking new housing, the amount of assistance available is based on the actual cost of last month's rent. The Manitoba Rent Relief Fund takes an intermediate approach, with the maximum amount of financial assistance usually being set at \$2500 or two months of rent, whichever is less. Thus, in Toronto and Vancouver, an applicant could seek assistance to cover more than two months of rental arrears if it falls within the maximum financial assistance, while in London and Manitoba, the rent banks are limited to covering two months of arrears.

In addition, the maximum amounts of financial assistance have different relationships to actual rental costs. While renters in subsidized units are eligible for assistance in three of the four rent banks participating in Staying Home, most rent bank clients are private market renters contending with soaring rental costs. One client reported, "I've always worked four or five jobs. You cannot maintain [housing costs] without four or five jobs." The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's housing data portal cites the median monthly cost of a one-bedroom private market rental apartment in Toronto as \$1540, in British Columbia as \$1400, in London as \$1100, and in Manitoba as \$1020. It is important to note that because these numbers include long-term tenants in rent-controlled apartments in all three provinces, they severely underestimate the cost of finding new housing. However, they do provide a window into the comparative cost of housing in each of the geographic areas that the rent banks cover. The amount of financial assistance provided by Toronto Rent Bank, British Columbia Rent Bank, and Manitoba Rent Relief Fund could realistically cover two months of rental arrears for a one-bedroom apartment for a client. However, the amount provided by BC Rent Bank is likely only sufficient for a single month's rent of a one-bedroom apartment in higher-cost jurisdictions like Vancouver and Victoria in the province, where rental costs are substantially higher.

The impact of the rising cost of living was evident across interviews with clients and staff, further underscoring the important financial support that rent banks provide. One client stated: "I've never struggled like I am right now. I'm barely making rent."

### Repayment of Financial Assistance (Grants versus Loans)

Different rent banks have different methods of providing financial assistance for housing, with some providing grants, some loans, and some a combination of grants and loans. At one end of the spectrum, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the Toronto Rent Bank has been providing grants to clients, which do not need to be repaid. In contrast, the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund and BC Rent Bank both provide housing assistance through loans, which must be repaid. The Manitoba Rent Relief Fund also provides loans to assist with utilities, moving costs, and housing stability needs like pest mitigation. For rent payment, the London Housing Stability Bank provides grants to clients on low and/or fixed incomes, and loans to clients in financial need with higher incomes. Payments for utilities are provided as grants or loans. Importantly, all Staying Home study rent banks that provide loans do so through an interest-free model. Amortization periods are typically up to 24 months after receiving a loan, with no interest paid, although there is flexibility and the BC Rent Bank can offer 36 months. The interest-free approach makes rent banks an important contrast to mainstream financial institutions, like banks, and microfinance lenders, like short-term, for-profit loan companies, which charge high interest on loans. Private market lenders charging high interest rates with punitive repayment terms can further destabilize individuals and households struggling to afford necessities. In addition, all rent banks requiring repayment have processes by which clients can pause repayments without penalty during times of financial need and/or renegotiate repayment periods to reduce the monthly payment if needed.

### *D. Funders and Structure*

#### Funding

As stated, the rent banks we explored are predominantly funded through governments at the provincial or municipal level. The Manitoba Rent Relief Fund is an initiative of the Government of Manitoba and funded by the province, though administered through the Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association, a not-for-profit organization. The BC Rent Bank is funded by the Province of British Columbia, which made an initial one-time investment of \$10 million in 2019, and a public announcement of another \$11 million in January 2024.

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<sup>5</sup> In British Columbia, there are some rent banks located in designated communities under the federal Reaching Home program that have been able to access funds to provide grants.

The BC Rent Bank is administered through Vancity Community Foundation and partners with local community agencies (most commonly not-for-profit organizations) to deliver rent bank programming. This arrangement is commonly referred to as a hub-and-spoke model. Local community-owned rent banks are required to fundraise locally by drawing in support from other private and public funders. The Toronto Rent Bank also operates through a hub-and-spoke model, with the Neighbourhood Information Post serving as the lead agency and several local organizations delivering services in different neighbourhoods. At times, the Toronto Rent Bank has received some funding from the provincial government, United Way, and private donors; however, the primary funder for more than 20 years has been the City of Toronto. Finally, the London Rent Relief Fund is jointly financed by the City of London and the Salvation Army and administered by the Salvation Army.

Importantly, rent banks are predominantly publicly funded programs, but are administered by not-for-profit service-providing agencies at arm's length from the government. This ensures that agencies providing support have the community relationships and knowledge needed to develop appropriate institutional guidelines and practices. Given the highly personal financial and housing information that rent bank applicants are required to share to secure a loan or grant, administration by non-profit partners also makes the services more accessible to members of groups who may be reluctant to engage in this way with government-administered programs due to past harms and/or mistreatment. Community-based organizations are also well-positioned to provide connection to available community supports in the area.

### First Point of Contact

The Manitoba Rent Relief Fund, BC Rent Bank, and London Housing Stability Bank all have an online application as the first point of contact for clients. Importantly, there is significant flexibility in approach for clients with barriers to online applications. The BC Rent Bank provides in-person, over-the-phone, and over-email options for clients with barriers to the online application. The London Housing Stability Bank also provides a phone-based initial point of contact for individuals with barriers to completing the online application. The Manitoba Rent Relief Fund provides phone-based support and has a hard-copy application option available as well. Clients without internet access can submit their application via mail or fax, which is then entered into the online portal.

For Toronto Rent Bank applicants, the first point of contact is through a central intake phone number where they engage with an initial screening process. Clients who pass through the initial screening process have their application sent to different partner agencies for intake. An email is sent to the applicant with a reference number and informs them that an intake worker will contact them within three or four business days to conduct an intake and assessment either by phone or in person (based on the applicant's preference).

### Decision-Makers

Once clients have completed an application, each rent bank has a unique decision-making process for determining whether the client's application for assistance is accepted. At the London Housing Stability Bank, individual case workers work with clients to complete forms and make recommendations on approval, which are then submitted to a manager for review, who makes the final recommendation. Complex or exceptional cases may have more manager involvement. A similar process is followed at the Manitoba Relief Fund and BC Rent Bank, where caseworkers make recommendations on individual client files, with managers making the final decision. In the case of the BC Rent Bank, rather than an individual manager reviewing the application, some local partners have a committee that takes on the decision-making role. Similarly, in the case of the Toronto Rent Bank, the caseworker at the local partner prepares and reviews the application with the client, which is then submitted to staff at the Neighbourhood Information Post, the managing partner, for review and approval. Importantly, each rent bank has an appeals mechanism as well, whereby clients can request a reconsideration of their application. Staff indicate that this often occurs when client circumstances change and/or the client is able to provide the documentation needed to verify a previously uncompleted component of the application. However, clients can also appeal applications if they simply believe there has been an error in rejecting their application.

In sum, all of the decision-making processes have two common threads: first, the importance of the caseworker's role in providing individualized support to clients, preparing the application, and sometimes making a recommendation concerning approval, and second, a degree of oversight from a second source, be it a manager, supervisor, or approvals committee.

### *E. Impact*

Client outcomes are typically tracked in some way by rent banks, which is discussed below. The Staying Home research project did not unnecessarily replicate the work of tracking client outcomes, but instead explored the experiences of clients. This approach allowed the research team to capture the impact of rent banks as defined by those who have gone through the process of utilizing these programs and to document impacts beyond the immediate financial assistance. Deep qualitative analysis that accompanies existing rent bank metrics provides a more complete understanding of the operation and impact of these programs. In analyzing the impact of rent bank programs, the client experience can be separated into three categories: the impact on their housing situation, the impact of the application and financial support distribution process, and the impact of the repayment process. This section considers each in turn and then turns to a discussion of community and system impacts.

#### Impact on Housing Situation

As stated, existing evaluations for rent bank programs demonstrate the efficacy of this microfinancing tool for improving or sustaining housing stability and preventing evictions. For example, the BC Rent Bank conducted a client survey in 2021, finding that 94% of respondents maintained or improved their housing after receiving rent bank support and 61% reported “that they would have faced homelessness had they not received services” (BC Rent Bank, 2021, p. 4). The Manitoba Rent Relief Fund’s pilot evaluation report (MNPHA, 2023) demonstrates that 77% of clients who participated in the evaluation reduced their concerns about eviction. Approximately half reported that the loan allowed them to avoid eviction. The success of rent banks in interrupting eviction or allowing clients to find new units was reflected in the interviews with clients. While there were challenges in the application and distribution processes, outlined below, the participants we spoke with who received support reported that their housing was maintained or improved. Indeed, for those who are approved for assistance, rent banks can make a significant impact on housing stability. Client participants for this research project reported, for example, paying off all or some arrears and avoiding eviction, moving into more affordable or appropriate units, and entering into the rental market with financial support for the initial payment of first and last month’s rent and/or security deposit. One client stated: “If I otherwise did not use the rent bank, I wouldn’t have had enough money for first and last on a place.”

So, that means I would have been homeless for longer.” Another said, “It saved me, and it saved my family. And it gave and kept a roof over mine and my children’s head.”

### Application, Financial Support, and Disbursement

In discussing the application process and the distribution of funds to landlords, clients reported mixed experiences that were at times stressful. Generally, rent banks require clients to provide considerable documentation in the application process, including identification, proof of income, a lease agreement or proof of rent, and bank statements. For some clients, gathering this documentation and providing it to the rent bank was challenging, especially if the client had to travel to different locations to physically gather the records. Others found the process to be very straightforward, especially when they were able to acquire and send documents electronically. Across the rent banks, most clients reported positive interactions with staff; however, there were a few instances where clients reported unfriendly staff or staff who were condescending.

In some cases, clients had to have rent bank staff review their spending by looking over their bank statements, while others did not have this experience. For those who were required to go through their bank statements with rent bank staff, some felt exposed and judged for their spending. One client stated that they would not access the rent bank again as a result of this experience. There is, without question, an emotional cost related to sharing one’s financial situation with a stranger, and while most reported little trouble, this requirement did have a negative impact on some applicants’ experiences. As part of the application process, there were a few clients who were encouraged to obtain formal eviction notices from their landlords to qualify for support for arrears or have their funding application accelerated.

Beyond the shared record of their financial situation, the timeline from applying to approval and the disbursement of funds to a landlord impacted the client’s experience and housing situation. Timelines for approval varied significantly within and across rent banks from a couple of days to several weeks. Typically, delays were related to the time required to gather documentation, although occasionally clients reported that rent bank staff moved slowly and clients had to call multiple times over weeks before hearing back. There was at least one case where a participant had to seek out a second eviction notice due to the length of time involved in the application process.



Where clients struggled to work with virtual portals or to easily gather information and documentation, rent bank staff did offer support. However, delays resulted in impatience from landlords, stress for clients, and, where clients were seeking new accommodations, lost units.

Indeed, the timeline and methods of payment to landlords was a challenge for many clients. For clients who were already housed and had applied for rental or utility arrears, the timeline for disbursement sometimes created tension with landlords. However, for those clients who were trying to secure a new unit and were seeking financial support for first and last month's rent and/or a security deposit, the timeline for dispersal of funds to landlords was a significant barrier. Access to a rent bank requires some kind of rental agreement; however, it is very challenging to obtain a rental agreement without providing first and last month's rent or a security deposit. In the current rental market, marked by low vacancy rates and high demand, it can be challenging to find a landlord who will hold a unit while a prospective tenant goes through the process of applying for financial assistance to cover the upfront costs of renting. At least one client reported losing access to units as a result of the requirement that a rental agreement be in place, while another client had to borrow money to secure the unit and then obtain financial assistance from the rent bank. While rent banks will communicate with landlords in an attempt to deal with this significant barrier to new tenancies, the process can be very stressful for clients. For both clients in existing tenancies and those seeking new ones, landlord impatience while waiting for the money to arrive was a challenge.

### Repayment Process

For clients who had been approved for loans, repayment typically took the form of monthly payments over the course of, and up to, 24 months. The payments are usually small. In our conversations with staff and clients, the lowest amount reported was approximately \$20/month, and clients usually did not have to make payments on the loan in the first month. Most clients reported that the repayment process was straightforward, and both clients and staff shared that there was flexibility for unexpected hardships, including reduced payments or deferred payments so long as the client communicated with the rent bank that held the loan. For clients with a consistent repayment record, the London Housing Stability Bank has provided forgiveness on a portion of their loan.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> During data collection in 2022–2023, this loan forgiveness was in place. It is no longer.

In Manitoba, clients with loans in good standing can reapply for additional assistance so long as they have not reached the maximum loan amount and the loan is because of a “new” disruption in earnings or other life shock.

There were clients who experienced administrative challenges with repayment, resulting in unexpected withdrawals from client bank accounts. In these cases, the money was not returned to the clients but used for future payments. Also, at least one client expressed frustration with repayment amounts, stating the following:

“I’m a mom, you know, every, every dollar matters...Like, yes, I need to pay it back, yes, I asked for the loan. I did it. But to be losing pay every month... the whole point of asking for help is so you can say ‘this is what I can do every month to pay that back.’ Not you...come up with something that takes away from my kids.”

Overall, however, most clients did not feel the repayment amounts and timelines were onerous. Unsurprisingly, given that the eligibility criteria for a loan requires, generally, an ability to sustain a tenancy most clients managed repayment without considerable hardship. These eligibility criteria, coupled with the flexibility provided to clients outlined above, have resulted in a repayment process that is, for most clients, manageable.

### Community and Systems Impacts

Staying Home delves into a range of impacts, notably examining how rent bank programs, incorporating elements of housing assistance, rent regulation, and income support, contribute to the broader framework of housing stability supports. By exploring rent banks, the study aims to comprehend the role of the programs in addressing critical gaps within housing assistance. While much attention has traditionally been focused on homeownership, homelessness, and social housing, rent banks emerge as pivotal interventions primarily tailored to support private market renters. This focus becomes particularly significant as it serves to counteract the potential vulnerability of low-income private market renters, who might otherwise resort to predatory payday loan companies in the absence of adequate support structures.

British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario all have government regulations concerning rental increases for private market tenants.

In the case of British Columbia, landlords are only permitted to increase rent once per year, and the rate of increase is set by the provincial government. Manitoba and Ontario have a similar regime but with exceptions for properties renting over \$1650/month and/or buildings less than 20 years old (Manitoba) and for properties that first became rental units after 2018 (Ontario). In all three provinces, there are opportunities for landlords to request Above Guideline Increases (AGIs). Moreover, all three provinces have vacancy decontrol, meaning that limits on rent increases are tied to individual tenancies. Once a tenant vacates a unit, the landlord may raise the rent to whatever amount they judge the private market will bear. The rental regulation regimes in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario all provide some security of tenure, through requirements of due process for eviction and limitations on landlords' ability to evict leaseholders. However, all three provinces provide less security of tenure protections for individuals in sublet arrangements (i.e., renting from another tenant or individual who is not the landlord) and in instances of shared accommodations (i.e., renting a room in a home shared with a landlord).

As rent banks are focused on stabilizing housing for tenants, the rent regulation regime matters, both in terms of the way increases to rent charges are navigated, and also in terms of variability in security of tenure. Rent bank clients are applying for assistance at a moment of financial crisis. Tenants in rent-controlled housing are better able to avoid the financial shock of sudden, dramatic increases in housing costs after receiving rent bank assistance, improving their housing stability. The majority of clients of all three rent banks in this study were in rent-controlled housing units, though some in Manitoba and Ontario were not. The housing stability experiences of rent banks in provinces with a greater degree of rental fee deregulation may be less favourable, and this is an important area for future research.

A second area where rent regulation regimes intersect with rent bank operations is through the objective of stabilizing housing through security of tenure. As a result, sometimes individuals renting rooms in shared accommodations, or subletting, are unable to use rent bank services, due to concern that the housing arrangements have limited security of tenure, and the client could be evicted. Nonetheless, arrangements such as renting a single room in an apartment or house are often the least expensive form of private market housing.

As a result, low-income tenants occupying these types of units may represent an important exclusion from the financial assistance offered through some rent banks.

A third structural dimension is the variable relationships of the rent bank programs to income support regimes, particularly provincial social assistance. In Manitoba and British Columbia, social assistance recipients are eligible for rent bank services under the same terms and conditions as other clients. In Ontario, there is a separate rental assistance program for social assistance recipients. In the case of the London Housing Stability Bank, this program is wrapped into rent bank operations, and social assistance clients are able to apply for rental assistance through the rent bank. In the case of the Toronto Rent Bank, the rental assistance program for social assistance recipients is separate from the rent bank, and social assistance recipients are unable to apply for rental assistance through the rent bank. The amount and terms of assistance offered through the social assistance rent relief program are less generous than those offered by the Toronto Rent Bank, creating an inequity for individuals seeking rental assistance who rely on social assistance for their income source.

#### *F. Formal and Informal Supports Provided Through Rent Banks*

Beyond the provision of direct financial aid, this research highlights that rent banks function as support hubs for clients. This support is provided not only through direct assistance from rent bank staff but also through facilitating access to various services and programs.

While many rent bank staff acknowledged the challenges of managing sizable caseloads, both clients and staff consistently emphasized the importance of establishing meaningful relationships during the highly supported rent bank application process. When clients seek financial assistance from the rent bank, they are typically facing a moment of crisis compounded by the fear of housing loss. Consequently, offering emotional support, aiding in self-advocacy, and guiding clients through program requirements emerge as integral aspects of the work performed by rent bank staff. One client shared their experience, describing the time they accessed the rent bank as a challenging period in their life, where they felt “so down on myself.” The staff person, however, was “super understanding and just really great to work with,” making them feel comfortable.

Another participant echoed these sentiments, stating, “it was a very positive experience, probably at one of the lowest times of our life. I have a really hard time asking for help when I need it, and they were very compassionate.”

Staff members also recognized an equity component to relationship building, particularly for individuals who were newcomers, disabled, had experienced past discrimination, or faced challenges with online programs and platforms. Rent bank staff dedicated extra time to assist these individuals with their applications and discuss other relevant services and programs. As one staff member explained, “It mostly boils down to the amount of time that I spend with the clients because I find that any barrier can be worked around if I just devote myself to them in a way that makes sense for them.” The ability to offer a highly supported application process plays a crucial role in working with clients during a vulnerable time and ensuring equitable access to rent bank services.

Rent bank staff also provide support through financial counselling. London’s Housing Stability Bank, for instance, has previously employed a money coach dedicated to assisting clients with financial management and budgeting. Even without a dedicated money coach position, staff allocate time to discuss budgeting with clients and recommended tactics and programs that can reduce overall costs for clients. Building strong relationships between clients and staff is essential, particularly in managing the repayment process. Staff members often offer flexibility to clients, allowing them to pause repayments or renegotiate their repayment schedule. As one staff member explained, “We are very open and want to help you, so we can sometimes lower the payments and negotiate. If someone picks a payment plan that turns out to be too much, we’re able to renegotiate and go to a lower plan.” One client highlighted the significance of the extra budgeting support staff provided, stating, “It really helped that they went that extra mile to figure it out for us, of how we could do this.” Rent bank staff also extend financial support by referring clients to other organizations, such as the partnership between the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund and community services that offer supports like financial literacy services, money matching, and budgeting.

A third way that rent banks support clients is by building connections to other supports for clients, both housing-related and non-housing-related. Often housing crises involve parallel crises in health and well-being, familial relationships, food security, income support, legal issues, etc.

In some cases, the funds offered by the rent bank may stabilize but not resolve the client crisis. Because of this, staff have to be creative to help them maneuver through the system and find other services that can help them. This is where knowledge of the local service landscape and relationships with social service-providing organizations become essential. Clients appreciate the staff's guidance in navigating additional resources; as one client mentioned, "They definitely shared resources, that's for sure." For example, the rent banks might refer clients to programs that aid with utility payments, provide free or low-cost legal advice, and facilitate access to food banks, employment supports, and/or furniture banks. As an example of an out-of-the-box partnership, the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund has collaborated with an organization focused on family reunification to assist lone parents and families seeking reunification. In turn, through these relationships, external service providers can increase awareness of the rent bank, and sometimes directly refer clients who would benefit from the rent bank's assistance.

Finally, rent bank staff also support clients in their interactions with landlords, acting as mediators in establishing repayment agreements. This function helps address power imbalances between landlords and tenants, with caseworkers advocating on behalf of tenants.

Rent bank staff frequently liaise directly with landlords, a key aspect of their work. In some communities, rent banks have cultivated relationships with landlords, providing valuable advice to clients navigating the housing market by recommending landlords amenable to rent bank payments and offering safe housing. As one staff member reported, "[Landlords have actually said to me] it sounds too good to be true. I don't believe that this actually exists." As landlords become familiar with rent bank programs and staff, they will sometimes recommend services to tenants to assist in preventing eviction. As one staffer explained, "we're helping the landlord help themselves" by providing a pathway to recover rental arrears. Some rent banks can also act as trustees for clients, paying rent directly to landlords from client income, which can be helpful in rebuilding trust between a landlord and tenant. As a neutral third party, rent banks can also facilitate meetings between landlords and tenants to resolve issues related to rent payments. The majority of the rent bank staff discussed positive experiences with landlords; however, some mentioned landlords with whom they refuse to work due to the conditions of their rental units, which can assist tenants in avoiding an unsafe housing situation.

Finally, in the case of Manitoba, there is a pre-approval process for people who are apartment hunting so that they can communicate access to these funds to prospective landlords and the rent banks can issue the funds to a landlord more quickly.

### *G. Challenges*

Rent banks have been recognized as highly effective in preventing evictions and stabilizing housing for clients, as indicated by several evaluation reports. However, our report highlights various challenges in the operation of rent banks, particularly given the broader affordable housing crisis and its impacts on renters.

First, instability of funding can be a stressor for rent bank operations, creating challenges in predicting future ability to maintain programming and needed staffing levels. For example, the London Housing Stability Bank recently had to reduce one of their non-monetary supports due to funding limitations. Some rent banks received increases in funding at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that enabled them to increase service levels in response to heightened demand but now face uncertainty about the continuation of those funding streams, even as the demand for services remains high. Even when annual funding is relatively predictable and stable for a defined period of time (e.g., three years), the absence of long-term agreements can frustrate the ability of a rent bank to engage in future planning and make the programs vulnerable when government changes.

Second, and relatedly, growing demand for services has created pressure on rent banks. All rent banks have seen increases in applicants since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. For some rent banks, like the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund, the pandemic was part of the catalyst for the creation of the rent bank. For others, the pandemic was a new factor that impacted already existing rent bank operations. In both cases, rent banks reported an increase in demand for services that has been slow to abate, resulting in high caseloads for staff and high demand for funds. One staff person explained, “[The] rent bank just sees so many clients, so many people, and there are not nearly enough workers.” The intensity of the workload, in terms of the caseload and crisis management, has contributed to issues of staff burnout and difficulties at some rent banks in hiring and retaining staff.



In turn, staff burnout can contribute to frustration with clients, especially those who are perceived as not respecting the rules and guidelines of the program.

A final challenge is the housing affordability context beyond the control of any given rent bank. Rent banks are intended as one-time support to facilitate housing stability for clients during a crisis, but with growing housing costs and a large proportion of clients with low and/or fixed incomes, rent banks are having difficulty meeting client needs. All the rent banks in this study demonstrated many ways that they work with clients to meet the requirement of fiscal stability in their housing arrangement, including budgeting support and openness to a diversity of income sources. Nonetheless, many clients struggle with the ongoing fiscal sustainability of their housing, without meaningful lower-rent housing options. One staff person explained, “I feel like, it’s kind of a Band-Aid solution because the root of the problem is, like, people just don’t have high incomes...it’s just, like, giving money, it doesn’t really solve the problem when they come back every year because they’re always struggling.” Another staff person echoed these sentiments, stating, “It’s getting too expensive for too many people and there just isn’t enough to go around, moneywise. Wages aren’t high enough, grocery prices are skyrocketing, housing prices are getting higher and higher and higher. And so, a lot of these clients are kind of trapped...” This speaks to the importance of rent banks as a targeted housing stability intervention as part of a broader regime of housing policy interventions to maintain and grow affordable housing units. These include robust regulation of rent increases, the direct provision of deeply affordable social housing, increases in social assistance payments, and investments in not-for-profit housing.

# PROMISING PRACTICES

As this report documents, most clients we spoke to, who were eligible for support, had their housing stabilized by a rent bank in the short and/or medium term. From these client experiences, and in speaking with rent bank staff, we were able to identify several promising practices that are being used at different rent banks in Canada. For the purposes of this report, we have organized these promising practices around the themes of flexibility, client-centered success metrics, the development of locally appropriate policies, and landlord-tenant relationship navigation.

## *A. Flexibility*

The ability of rent banks to address individual client situations was a key theme in the research. Both rent bank clients and staff reported flexibility in the application process, documentation requirements, and repayment.

### Application process

Applications to the rent banks included in this report involve a multistep process. First, prospective clients must complete an eligibility screening. Typically, this screening is initiated through an online application or over the phone. In the case of the Toronto Rent Bank, all pre-screening is completed through a phone call to a call centre. The other three rent banks use an online portal and then follow up with clients to complete their screening process and initiate an application either over the phone or in person. However, phone numbers are made available for any applicant who cannot complete the online form, and drop-ins and/or emailed applications are also available, depending on the rent bank. Typically, clients who appear to meet eligibility criteria must submit all required documentation to move forward with the assessment phase, which can be daunting. However, rent bank staff do provide support. For example, the Manitoba Rent Relief Fund has staff follow up four times on outstanding applications before closing the file. The goal is to meet the applicants where they are at.

### Documentation

As stated, documentation can be a barrier for an applicant. The rent banks included in this report do require a considerable amount of information about an applicant as well as documentation to support the application.

Required documentation typically includes identification, proof of income, some evidence of a lease agreement, proof of arrears where applicable, and, in some cases only, a notice of eviction or a CRA notice of assessment. However, across the board, both clients and staff reported flexibility in the types of documentation that can fulfill the application requirements and/or will offer support to a client in securing the required documentation. For example, while a CRA notice of assessment is preferred by the Manitoba Rent Bank and applicants are encouraged to file their taxes, applications can, in some cases, proceed without a notice of assessment. The Toronto Rent Bank can permit self-employed applicants to submit supporting evidence in the form of invoices, correspondence with clients, or the like as proof of income. Documentation can be a significant source of stress for people experiencing a crisis. Therefore, providing support and flexibility around what is considered sufficient evidence to support an application is necessary.

### Repayment

Once a loan has been issued, clients enter into the repayment period. The method of repayment varies from rent bank to rent bank, with direct bank withdrawals being understood as the preferred approach for ease of tracking and to support repayment. However, BC Rent Bank reported that clients can repay via cheque or cash while the London Housing Stability Bank reported accepting cash for those without a bank account, thereby removing an access barrier that likely impacts some of those clients most in need of support.

Beyond flexibility in repayment methods, all rent banks that issue loans reported that they will work with clients who are struggling with repayment. Options include deferred payments and longer amortization payments to reduce payments. So long as the client communicated with the rent bank in advance, expectations of payment could be flexible. The Manitoba Rent Bank builds relief into their program by not taking payment until at least the second month of the loan, with additional flexibility depending on circumstances; the London Housing Stability Bank has in the past issued a grant in the form of a forgivable portion of their loan to those clients whose repayment has been consistent. This flexibility in repayment amounts and schedule allows clients to maintain their loan in good standing with the rent bank, allowing them to come back and reapply in the future if needed.

There is no financial penalty associated with defaulting on the loan and most rent banks do not send clients to collections. As stated earlier in this report, the repayment amounts can be very small monthly amounts. However, the high cost of housing, food, and utilities means that clients can sometimes struggle to make their payments. Therefore, many rent banks offer the opportunity for clients to defer or lower their payments if need be.

### *B. Client-centered success metrics*

The metrics for the success of a rent bank are primarily the number of clients who obtain or maintain housing stability and the period of time that housing stability is maintained. Where rent banks issue loans, repayment rates are a secondary metric of success. As rent banks are microfinancing tools that can interrupt eviction, utility shut-off, and/or the use of high-interest loans, rent bank providers focus their measurement of success in terms of positive impact on their clients. This approach to measuring success is distinct from mainstream lending programs where the rate of repayment is often the primary focus. Rent banks prioritize housing stability and, where loans are issued, will work with clients to maintain their loans in good standing and allow them to reapply in the future. This non-punitive approach to microfinancing is structured, according to rent bank staff, to provide an environment where clients feel supported in repaying their loans. Indeed, many clients reported a positive repayment experience with these loans based on need and ability to repay in small amounts and not creditworthiness.

### *C. Granting Practices*

Throughout the country, the use of non-repayable grants by rent banks has been inconsistent and intermittent largely due to funding availability. The depth of the housing crisis, coupled with economic factors such as rising inflation, has created an environment in which renters have less capacity to repay a loan, and where a grant becomes the only option to prevent eviction. Renters who are experiencing higher levels of socio-economic poverty are less likely to qualify for a loan. Grants provide a mechanism for potentially expanding the client pool or providing greater amounts of assistance in especially difficult times.

As mentioned earlier, the Toronto Rent Bank currently operates on an exclusively grants-based model where income must exceed expenses but a demonstrated ability to repay is not required. The London Housing Stability Bank is able to offer grants to individuals with fixed incomes who would be unable to repay a loan. In British Columbia, select rent bank partners have been able to access funding through the federal Reaching Home program to offer grants or a hybrid grant/loan to renters who would otherwise not qualify for financial assistance. The use of grants to expand eligibility for rent bank assistance can enhance the social impact of programming. In the context of limited, and often insecure, funding and the significant demands being placed on rent banks at this time, shifting to grants-based assistance may not be feasible among rent bank providers nor may funders be willing to allocate funds for grants.

#### *D. Locally appropriate eligibility criteria*

Rent bank programming that covers a large geographical area, such as British Columbia and Manitoba, has developed eligibility criteria that speak to local realities. Specifically, both British Columbia and Manitoba use income limits developed by the province for affordable housing programs. These income limits shift in relation to the local costs of rent as well as household composition. For example, there is a higher income cut-off in larger urban areas such as Vancouver and Winnipeg and/or for applicants in units with multiple bedrooms. This dynamic approach to eligibility allows for a more equitable distribution of rent bank support and responsiveness to local housing market conditions.

#### *E. Landlord-Tenant relationship navigation*

A key concern of rent bank clients seeking to avoid eviction or secure a unit is communication with their landlord or prospective landlord about their rent bank assistance. Because payments are made directly to the landlord, tenants must put the landlord in touch with the rent bank at some point in the process. Tenants applying for support with arrears are sometimes anxious about their landlord receiving the payment quickly enough to forestall eviction. Tenants applying to use the rent bank for a deposit on a new unit report challenges in assuring landlords that their money is forthcoming and that signing a lease is desirable.

Staff at all rent banks recognize these challenges and report communicating directly with landlords to explain the process of application and the length of time it will take the landlord to receive the payment. The staff across all rent banks are often doing the work of advocating for tenants with landlords and supporting landlords to fill out any paperwork required to accept a rent bank payment. This advocacy work by staff is necessary in a country with an incredibly competitive rental market, with many applicants for a single unit and a lack of vacancy control that makes eviction an attractive option.

These promising practices can be a source of planning for jurisdictions looking to initiate rent bank programming in the future.

# AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Staying Home explored the design and operation of four rent banks in three Canadian provinces for the purpose of building knowledge of rent banks in Canada. The project attends to and compares individual rent bank operations, their histories, assessment tools, lending and granting practices, and funding relationships, while drawing attention to promising practices adopted by different rent banks, which may be important for others to take note of and learn from. Although this study has illuminated certain facets of rent banks, it has also indicated prospective avenues for future research.

Understanding jurisdictional differences: Rent banks are a relatively recent housing policy intervention in Canada, and have emerged unevenly across the country. There are municipal rent banks present in Ontario and Alberta, while Manitoba, British Columbia, and most recently New Brunswick operate province-wide programs. Understanding why some jurisdictions choose to develop rent banks, as well as how rent banks interact with provincial housing policy regimes, can help us understand the evolving landscape of housing support systems and identify potential areas for improvement and collaboration. By examining the decision-making processes behind the establishment of rent banks in different jurisdictions, researchers can uncover the unique challenges and priorities that prompt the adoption of such interventions.

Comparative client outcomes: While data is available for individual rent banks concerning client housing stability outcomes, there has been no research that has explored housing stability outcomes comparatively among rent banks. A comparative exploration of client outcomes among different rent banks may help practitioners and scholars understand how variations in rent banks impact client demographics and outcomes.

Rent banks and income support programs: One major difference among the rent banks explored in this study concerns the eligibility of social assistance recipients for rent bank funds, with London, Manitoba, and British Columbia rent banks maintaining eligibility for social assistance recipients, while Toronto does not.

Greater investigation of the impacts of these distinctions among the rent banks explored in this study, and other rent banks operating in Canada, is crucial to understanding the overall effectiveness and efficiency of such programs in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. By delving deeper into the specific criteria and policies surrounding the eligibility of social assistance recipients for rent bank funds, researchers can shed light on the potential implications for individuals in various regions.

Landlord relationships: One finding from this study is that rent bank staff often take on the role of working directly with landlords, both to secure individual client's housing and in a broader sense to develop ongoing relationships with some housing providers. In turn, these landlord-rent bank relationships can assist clients in navigating a complex, and at times unfriendly, housing market. A more focused inquiry exploring how rent banks develop relationships with landlords, and why landlords are willing and/or not willing to take on rent bank clients as tenants or halt eviction proceedings for clients, would help develop an understanding of these dimensions of housing stability and security.

Microfinance and predatory lenders: The findings of this study suggest that rent banks serve as an alternative to predatory private market lenders, which low- and moderate-income households may turn to in times of financial distress. As a result, an important benefit of rent banks may be a reduction in the use of predatory lenders by renters, and an ability to more quickly stabilize the financial situation of renters by avoiding high fees and interest rates. The stability benefits of rent bank assistance, however, may depend on whether applicants become aware of rent banks as an option early on during a time of financial crisis. If potential applicants rely heavily on high-interest lenders, prior to becoming aware of the option of a rent bank, this can impact their ability to qualify for the rent bank assistance. More research is needed to better understand whether access to rent banks reduces reliance on predatory lenders.



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