

Going it ALONE

A group that helps people with disabilities live independently is going its own way, too. After years of frustration with social housing, they are now buying condos



JULIE OLIVER/OTTAWA CITIZEN, CANWEST NEWS SERVICES

Awaiting a place of his own

The prospect of moving out of home is exciting for Ian Murphy, right, a 28-year-old man who has worked with Keenan Wellar, left, for 10 years. Mr. Murphy says his parents are nearing retirement age and he's determined to move out by age 30.

He has visited his prospective condo building several times and is looking forward to using the pool, the sports equipment and walking along the paths nearby. The building is well served by city buses.

"Whenever we want to we can call up our friends in the west end and ask, what are you doing tonight?" said Mr. Murphy.

He is likely to share the condo with his twin brother, Warren. The condos they are looking at are 750 square feet for a one-bedroom or 900 square feet for a two-bedroom and cost about \$200,000.

BY PATRICK DARE

Keenan Wellar has one answer to the confounding problem of how to create more social housing: Don't.

He is co-founder, with Julie Kingstone, of LiveWorkPlay, a Chapel Street organization that helps people with intellectual disabilities. Mr. Wellar and Ms. Kingstone have been thinking since 2002 about how their clients can find their own housing. Almost all live with their parents and the questions loom large: What happens when people have progressed to the point where they're anxious to be on their own? What happens when their parents become old and ultimately die?

They spent years exploring the government-sponsored route of subsidized housing. They went to meetings of Action Ottawa, a government initiative to get more affordable housing built. They explored many possibilities, including the idea of group homes, or a kind of foster home.

But they found that they were "way down the priority list" for the Ontario government, which is trying to find suitable accommodation for the residents of Rideau Regional Centre in Smiths Falls, adults with developmental disabilities. The centre is being closed.

And even though the various levels of government have lots of meetings and reports about housing, there isn't much fresh thinking on ways to build and maintain it.

The City of Ottawa's public housing corporation has dozens of buildings in disrepair and a total maintenance and renovation backlog estimated at \$ 600 million.

"It's a pretty sad situation," says Mr. Wellar.

They decided the answer might be to build and run their own building. They even had architectural drawings done and were eyeing land in Alta Vista. But again they ran into long waits for government help and questions about whether they'd have enough money for a quality building.

As well, they wondered: Was it a good idea to house these people together under a single roof, and turn LiveWorkPlay into a landlord, running what could be viewed as what Mr. Wellar calls "a really nice prison where everyone was safe and everybody was kept away?" In 20 years, would such a building make sense, or be viewed as archaic segregation of the disabled?

They decided, after discussion with the board of directors, that it wasn't a good plan and that they'd drop the idea of occupying publicly financed and controlled housing. Instead, they began looking at the existing stock of private properties in Ottawa and arrived at a solution: Buy condominiums.

"There's absolutely no point in waiting around for government," says Mr. Wellar. "These people will be in their 70s."

The organization has been preparing people to leave home, and testing the need for supports, for some time. Residence rooms at Carleton University were rented for some of the clients in 2003 and 2004 and they lived there for a few weeks. They have taken trips to New York City, Miami and Santa Monica and have plans to visit Boston. Everyone's getting a sense of how much space they need, realizing in the process that each person wants a bathroom.

Some families of the 51 clients have the money to buy a condo apartment. Some larger condos may be purchased jointly by two families. One client has been in her condo for three weeks and things are going well. A house-warming party at her place made a lot of clients think that moving out would be a good thing to do.

Some families don't have the funds to buy a condo. So LiveWorkPlay hopes to buy some to rent out to clients.

This week LiveWorkPlay bought its first condominium unit, with two bedrooms, and will rent it out to two clients beginning in May. The money for the purchase is from the charity's auctions, donations from individuals, corporations and service clubs, as well as from savings found through spending reductions and some small fundraisers.

Within two years, Mr. Wellar expects as many as 10 residents will be living on their own.

LiveWorkPlay hopes that charitable funders, such as the Ontario Trillium Foundation and other benefactors in the community, will provide more money so that the organization can buy more condominiums.

Mr. Wellar says donors understandably have a tough time getting excited about some of his group's concepts, such as self-advocacy, which helps people make their own decisions and be more independent. But he says a concrete thing like buying condos — which will make a lasting contribution to the clients' lives and remain a valuable asset — might be attractive to donors.

LiveWorkPlay will provide support for the people who move into their own homes, with help on things like finances. The group will help people shop, plan and make meals. But Mr. Wellar says they don't want to be telling clients what to do in their homes. "Life is not a program," he says.

LiveWorkPlay is especially interested in a couple of large condominium towers but Mr. Wellar stresses the organization will not create an influx of clients into a single building. He says that the movement of people into buildings will be "very gradual," and that when a client moves into a building, he or she will have contacts there to call for support.

One of the reasons they are looking at condominium, rather than apartment buildings, is that they want buildings where people know one another and care about the place. Mr. Wellar is convinced that once clients move into condo buildings, they will quickly endear themselves to the other residents, walking neighbours' dogs, helping people with errands and taking part in social events.

Mr. Wellar says five years of looking into the housing issue has been quite a journey for LiveWorkPlay, but now they are happy. "It's finally coming true."

He says housing in Canada has become a perennial question of public policy but perhaps it should not be.

"Maybe it's not such a big deal," he says. "They're just moving out."