

We need a landscape of description right now, not a portrait.

Over the last 12 months Jen St. Denis, a Tyee Reporter, has written a number of stories about Atira Property Management Inc. (APMI) focused on perceived failures of APMI employees including front-line staff, managers, directors and leadership but without ever touching on the material issues. While her intent may be noble and while she and her editors may believe they are making a positive contribution to the discourse around the profoundly complex and seemingly intractable issues that create the Downtown Eastside, we maintain she and The Tyee are in fact causing harm. We have watched our co-workers and tenants beaten down by negativity about their work and housing, develop increased stress and anxiety in anticipation of what will be written next, and when speaking up online to offer a counter story they have experienced racism, sexism and classism, which are always part of any story, but in communities like the DTES especially.

For this reason, we have collectively chosen to speak out.

We apologize in advance for the lack of brevity. This writing, to be honest, barely scratches the surface and we invite community members to reach out if they have questions, concerns and or anything to add.

First: Let's move the elephant out of the room. These stories are a thinly veiled attempt to "expose" Janice Abbott. We have all watched reporters cling on to community gossip that she is corrupt. For years different reporters, disgruntled ex staff, people who are envious or otherwise disingenuously motivated as well as general objectors have been raking muck. The Tyee is apparently no different and resorts to inuendo in most articles and is in fact attempting to attack her through constant surveillance on APMI's staff; an interesting tactic to put pressure on people's work on the front line to expose the leadership. It demonstrates poor ethics, decision making and is racist, classist and sexist.

Atira Property Management Inc. has one, sole shareholder, Atira Women's Resource Society, which is a nonprofit organization. All of its assets are community owned. When Janice leaves, and she likely will in the coming years having been at Atira for almost 30 years, she will leave everything behind, for the community.

Also, the truth is we beg BC Housing for funds; for paint, new bathrooms, more staff, etc., Sometimes we are successful and sometimes not, just like other non-profits. It's us in those meetings, not Janice. She is not the only employee at Atira. She does not do 100% of the work. She is not everywhere all of the time. To assume so diminishes the rest of us; our work, our passion, our commitment. We are more than 500 workers from front-line to directors; workers who show up every day in really complicated situations and who do our very best and don't deserve The Tyee's attacks. We are here, dealing with the fallout of all of our lack of action, over decades. This is on all of us, not APMI staff. If Jen St Denis actually did her work, she would know that all of the large non-profits are struggling to handle the increased pressure of trying to meet the needs of increasingly complex social problems with limited resources and support.

There is also competition for the more interesting and exciting aspects of this work. If you think the SROs are on that list, give your head a shake. We have stepped up to do this work.

Second: A year or more of surveillance on APMI staff and tenants to find out whether SROs are good housing or not is some solid “Columbusing.” All of us could have told you it isn’t dignified housing at the beginning and, in fact, we have been telling anyone who would listen for years. All of us desperately want new housing built. We care about the people who live in our housing (we actually know them) and we bring an intersectional, trauma-informed lens to our work. We understand that conditions are poor, that people should have their own bathrooms and kitchens and that the SROs, unlike the new builds, have increasing security issues, especially as policy failures such as prohibition, lack of mental health and other critical supports and the growing drug poisoning crisis linger on in our community.

And things are going to get worse. The SROs are more than 100-years-old with most of the people who live in them suffering with historical and ongoing trauma brought on by complicated and often chaotic lives due to colonization, poverty, racism, misogyny, ableism, transphobia and other experiences of both structural and non-structural oppression. The buildings and the people who live and work in them are expected to do so much. We must allow unrestricted guests but not have guest issues. We not only respond to the drug poisoning crisis for tenants, but also for the larger community who are unhoused and who visit our buildings. During the COVID lock down while most people in Vancouver over-shopped, worked from home and binged on Netflix, people living and working in SROs were expected to ensure no one in our buildings contracted COVID, but still provide safe places for tenants and their friends who are unhoused to use while everyone shared bathrooms, cramped hallways, lobbies and common areas; manage the increasing conflict and violence that resulted from the lockdown and its impact on the drug supply; to keep people off the streets so they weren’t scaring/offending the neighbours, to house people evicted from encampments, set up new programs and deal with the often negative responses from neighbourhoods that felt put upon by decisions made by politicians and bureaucrats, not by non profits. One important note; when we introduced guest restrictions in the early stages of COVID, damage to our buildings decreased dramatically, maintenance needs decreased, and cleanliness increased. Turns out as many as 300 guests a day has an impact on our buildings,

Third: Who are our staff? We are a lot of different people that have been described with singularity and with stigma throughout The Tyee’s coverage. 38% of us identify as female; 47% as male and 7% as members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. 19% of us are people of colour, 8% Black and 33% of us are Indigenous. We range in age from 20 to 74 years and a whopping 78% of us come to this work through lived experience. We are not, as has been suggested, all using criminalized drugs while on shift. For the purpose of this statement, we will focus on front desk staff as they have been targeted by Jen St. Denis’s reporting. We do hire 80% of our staff from the community. We have never hidden this and in fact we are proud of it
<https://atira.bc.ca/sites/default/files/APMI%20Social%20Impact%20Report%20-%20July%202017.pdf>.

Do problems exist, of course, but problems exist in every work place and in every sector, in every company, everywhere; problems with work performance, attendance and yes, problematic substance use. The truth is most people working in the DTES have struggled with substance use and or mental wellness and some still do. It's the reason we are passionately driven to do this work. The problem is most of the rest of us have class and race protection that gives us privacy and protects us from stigma and surveillance. So, when The Tyee reports that several former employees (their WCB findings are public, were provided to Jen St. Denis and an interesting read, by the way) say that most employees are using and APMI doesn't respond, how could The Tyee or the former employees possibly be sure of that? How would they know whether the staff they came into contact with were using at all, were using criminalized drugs or legal drugs such as prescription methadone, anti-depressants or anti-anxieties. We obviously can't comment to either party because that's someone's health information and we refuse to stigmatize criminalized drug users especially during a drug poisoning crisis. Promoting this stigma is harmful and will entrench already existing barriers to people seeking lifesaving supports and is racist, sexist and classist.

Hiring people with lived experience is important because it provides an additional element of compassion and empathy. The idea we are not educated is ridiculous and racist, classist and sexist. We simply bring a different kind of education, the kind you don't learn in a classroom, which requires privilege. We haven't been afforded that opportunity, but that does not make our education any less important.

A lot of people in the DTES avoid healthcare and other community services many of us take for granted because of stigma and a lack of understanding of our trauma responses; people with lived expertise are a bridge who saves lives. Also, APMI includes people that the economic system typically ignores, and work for some people can be a lifeline to inclusion, creating the opportunity to contribute and have a sense of purpose and belonging. APMI has many stories about how its hiring policies have radically changed lives and how people have started as front desk workers, become support workers, managers and directors, including moving on to other organizations that likely would not have interviewed them had they not first worked and gained experience at Atira. People with lived and living experience offer on-the-ground updates and education about poisoned criminalized drugs and overdose response. APMI staff (and all people with lived expertise) also have a right to different kinds of education and the work we are doing currently to provide it is innovative and created specifically for people with lived/living expertise. It is important to note that our front-desk staff, who are primarily our community staff, earn between \$17.03 and \$19.12/hour at present, and tenant support workers between \$19.66 and \$24.45/hour. They also have generous employer-paid benefits, start with three weeks vacation, get three weeks paid sick leave every year, one week of paid special leave and are covered by this collective agreement:

<https://agreements.bcgeu.ca/pdfs/PostedFiles/Drafts/17033124D.pdf> .

We also provide opportunities to tenants who are not ready for a traditional employment relationship but who are ready, willing and able to support their friends and neighbours and contribute to their buildings.

Fourth: Our response to Jen St. Denis and The Tyee; for months now our work has been interrupted. We have received unrelenting buckshot emails ranging across multiple projects managers and staff groups, requesting information about building issues, human resource issues, past staff complaints, WCB findings, information about overdoses, tenant complaints, pest control issues etc. These requests often come with arbitrary deadlines and it has been exhausting for all of us to respond. Hundreds if not thousands of collective hours seeking information, talking to staff and preparing responses that we now know are ignored because the story has already been written. Believing we have this kind of time with what we are working on is mindboggling. There have been days and weeks where we all feel like we are working for The Tyee and we have collectively decided it is a waste of public money and that we must re-focus our energies on the systemically driven multiple issues she describes, not on pandering to her relentless requests for information

We have also done our best to lift staff morale with staff describing to us that much of what Jen St. Denis is reporting is untrue, exaggerated or lacks critical context. We have heard about feelings of humiliation, burnout and the stress of feeling constantly surveilled. We have listened to managers and staff explain to us that they simply can't keep the buildings clean all the time and everything in good repair when they have more than 100 tenants, half again that many permanent guests and in some buildings as many as 300 guests a day. Front line staff are constantly defending themselves, fearful that Jen St. Dennis's defamatory reporting will negatively impact their work. As managers and directors, we find this heartbreaking. We should all be thanking them for showing up every day and giving the very best they have.

We have also heard tenant complaints, people feeling humiliated by the worst pictures of their imperfect homes/SROs publicized, again and again. We have visited sites and had tenants pull us into their rooms to demonstrate they don't "live like that". We have done our best to try to build tenants up who are feeling stigmatized, again. Unsurprisingly to anyone who knows this community, we have heard they are tired of having a woman with a camera in their homes for months on end asking them if they have complaints. This would never happen to any other tenant group; yes, marginalized people must have a voice, but they are also entitled to privacy which SROs don't afford much of. We will continue to protect what little they have so yes and although APMI has always had one of the most welcoming and open doors to the media, we are drawing them closed. Another important point; we did offer Jen St. Denis the opportunity to come spend a week or two working alongside us, learning about what it's like to work in an SRO, an offer she declined. So, don't come unannounced anymore. People who live in SROs deserve the same notice as everyone else that media and/or film crews are about to descend on their homes, and the right to say no.

Final note, stop asking or insinuating that we are responsible for homicides or the fact they are unsolved. Homicides in SROs are almost always the outcome of unregulated survival capitalism and until we end prohibition, decriminalize drugs, provide a safe supply, end poverty, etc., violence and death will continue. And the VPD investigates crimes, not us. We are horrified and

traumatized by these events and so are our staff and tenants. You are not a trauma-informed reporter if you don't understand this.

Fifth: Our response to other service providers. We know you get the systemic issues we face. To quote Audrey Lorde, "Your silence will not protect you." To those peer workers, staff, former staff, residents, former residents and community members who we witnessed speaking up on social media, who risk criticism and are often shut down, we thank you... of course you get this stuff.

Sixth: What have we been up too this year? We continue to support each other; a great team of directors all who have worked frontline in the DTES for years and have combined 42 years working in this community and sector. We have responded to the pandemic including creating compiled policy and trained hundreds of staff. We opened two COVID isolation buildings. We opened a housing co-op for staff struggling with the housing crisis. We have opened and staffed washroom trailers at encampments and provided (yes, imperfect) housing to campers. We have responded to many building floods and fires, prepared for a heat dome, welcomed guests into our buildings who are unhoused and worked hard to keep predatory behaviours out. We have, despite COVID challenges, trained and or re-certified over 70 people in first aid in the last two months alone. We have, despite regional staffing shortages, continued to hire and keep to our mandate of supporting and offering diverse groups of staff job opportunities solidifying APMI's commitment to the community and to equity. We added a full-time employment facilitator (increasing team to two) to support our staff through various challenges. Through 100% donations, we launched a pet outreach program providing much needed support to our many, many tenants who have pets. We have expanded our online training program and created trainings that cover all of the issues and more that The Tye describes. To the best of our knowledge, APMI is the only organization to do so and we have offered thousands of trainings and collectively hundreds of hours of learning has taken place. We have started an online Speaker Series and our allies in the community are sharing their knowledge with staff.

This is all in addition to many other staff programs we have had in place for years and even decades including our Hands-Up Employee Loan Program (HELP), which was established 15 years ago to provide employees an interest-free alternative to payday lenders and to borrow money for emergency situations; and professional development programs that have allowed more than 30 employees to secure their property and facilities management certifications (including several people who were originally community hires).

Conclusion: If we lived in a perfect world, colonialism wouldn't exist, we wouldn't have racism, patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, poverty or predatory behaviours, but that perfect world doesn't exist. So here we are living and working in the depths of colonialism and in a system that continues to reinforce its violence on people made more vulnerable because of it. Colonialism is traumatic thus every person is born into trauma and while many have privilege to maneuver away from the constant harms, many more have not been afforded the same opportunity.

Over the past six years our team and tenants have faced increased pressure in SROs due to the drug poisoning crisis; many of us have lost family and dear friends. Because we are a predominantly racialized employee group, including our leaders, we are disproportionately impacted by this loss. It's been horrific and traumatic on us all. We are working through a pandemic without the protections that most sectors are afforded, in crowded old buildings difficult to clean and with poor ventilation. Our buildings are cold in the winter, hot in the summer, vulnerable to heavy rain and other extreme weather events. We have increasing guest pressures as our housing crisis wages on, unabated. Due to who we hire we have also faced an onslaught of media covering painful, close-to-home topics such as the Me Too Movement, Black lives Matter, children's bodies in hidden graves at residential schools, murdered and missing women and children; a powerful right-wing global movement attacking Trans peoples' right to dignity, healthcare, exercise and just about every right to be included as full members in society, environmental disaster. And now The Tyee's relentless reporting on any perceived error.

We need a landscape of our work right now, not a portrait; a thick, nuanced description of a complex landscape that holds our staff up as the imperfect but still heroes that they are, people who are doing their very best to hold things together in the face of all of our collective lack of action; so, you don't have to.

Directors & Managers at APMI
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www.atira.ca