

accessing HOME



TRANSCRIPT, PODCAST EPISODE 3: Untangling bureaucratic red tape

[Music: "Lemon and Melon," a 99 bpm instrumental track with cello and electric guitar fades in]

Meagan Miller: Not a lot of people like bureaucracy. I don't blame them. It's slow, frustrating, and often feels like an obstacle rather than a tool. But for all its flaws, bureaucracy is kinda important. It's how we make sure decisions are fair and rules are followed—so that people don't just make things up as they go along. This tension, however, is especially clear in housing. Right now, there's a growing push to cut red tape around housing development. Especially in big cities, where supply's not keeping up with demand. But in these conversations, it's important to understand how bureaucracy interacts with accessibility. Because, for people with disabilities, bureaucracy is a double-edged sword. It creates essential protections. But, at the same time, it also creates barriers. So how do we balance efficiency with equity? And what happens if we don't?

In this episode, we'll explore the impact of bureaucracy on community housing for people with disabilities. And what this means, moving forward.

I'm Meagan Miller

Zachary Weeks: I'm Zachary Weeks

Meagan Miller: And this is

Together: Accessing Home

[Music: fades out]

Crista Christensen: I have a walker, I have a cane. I'm fighting to get a scooter right

now. But they won't give me a scooter till I get approval for the ramps. I don't have the ramps because they say they don't allow ramps. They don't allow lifts. They don't allow anything that takes away from the original design of the unit. Well, does that include the mold I lived with for six years in the walls too? Or the asbestos in my ceiling?

Meagan Miller: This is Crista Christensen

Crista Christensen: I've lived in Civida housing for almost 30 years now, and raised five children in it. I've done everything from coach community soccer, to be a family support worker to—oh, heck—I think during COVID, for most of it, I was running a food bank out of my house. So, I'm kinda the one that everybody goes to around here.

Meagan Miller: Crista has multiple sclerosis, or MS for short

Crista Christensen: I was diagnosed at an incredibly young age. Why it was missed when I was younger, and through my teens, I don't know. Probably because you didn't hear the word MS a lot back then. I know when I first got my diagnosis at 21, I was shocked because I honestly didn't know what MS was, you know. I had this doctor say, "Okay, well, you have MS. Don't get married, don't have kids, you're probably going to be in a wheelchair, you know, by the time you're X amount years old." So, basically, you're not going to have a life.

I didn't really like what he had to say. So I just kind of said no, and thought he was crazy and went on my way. And then I have a son who was born with autism. We pretty much knew that. But he was high functioning, and nobody wanted to help us. No doctors, no pediatricians, because he wasn't autistic to the point where he was nonverbal laying on the floor, rocking back and forth. So I literally broke down actually two years ago and had to borrow money to get him privately diagnosed. So I just think people need to start thinking outside the box, instead of trying to throw everybody in the box and say that everybody has to do something a certain way, because it's not working. Right?

[Music: "Throughput", a track that features electric guitars and rhodes, fades in]

So that's pretty much who I am. And as for that. My other children are all grown up, moved out of the house and are very successful in life in their careers. So there you go. But now my

focus is just on trying to provide the best life I can for my son.

Meagan Miller: Crista and her son live in a Civida townhouse. And while it's been their family home for a while now, it's nowhere near accessible. The unit is split between two levels. The kitchen and living room are on the main floor, while the bedrooms and the only bathroom are upstairs. That means Crista has to navigate a steep set of stairs just to do basic, daily tasks. And if she wants to leave the house, there's another set of steps at both the front and back doors. All of which are a challenge.

Crista Christensen: MS doesn't discriminate, you can't control it. So I may wake up and fall flat on my face, because my legs don't want to work that day. Right? It doesn't care that I have a son to take care of. It doesn't care that, you know, I have things to do. It doesn't care.

[Music: fades out]

Meagan Miller: There are solutions that can help. Home modifications like ramps or stairlifts would address these issues. And Crista even qualifies for funding to install them. But she's hit roadblock after roadblock in trying to get them approved in her unit.

Crista Christensen: It's incredibly hard, because you have, you know, homecare coming in and assessing you and going to bat for you and their social workers and nonprofit agencies and saying, "Okay, she needs a ramp, she needs this." And then there's the RAMP program. And you filled out the paperwork. And either got to get, you know, housing to sign off on it, or one of the representatives to sign off on it, and they know you need it. But they're being told, "No, we don't do this. We don't allow any ramps or lifts or anything done to our units." And it's like, okay, well, you obviously don't understand federal and provincial law, because I have rights here. And so I personally have found that in order to get anything that I may need out of housing, I literally have to get a lawyer involved. So, the question that I have is: Why do I have to go to such great lengths to get these people to realize, hey, I need a lift. Or, hey, I need a ramp. Or hey, I can't have mold in my house for eight years.

[Music: "Trapped in the Stairwell", a playful instrumental track that features acoustic guitar and bass fades in]

Meagan Miller: In Alberta, like the rest of Canada, housing providers have a duty to accommodate. They're required to make reasonable efforts to ensure equal access for people protected under the

Human Rights Act, which includes people with disabilities. They're also expected to respond in a way that's both reasonable and timely. But what counts as reasonable and timely is kinda open to interpretation, and that's where things get tricky.

Zachary Weeks: You're right. It's completely subjective. And what would those folks do if that was them in that situation? And this is where I go back to: We got to be more compassionate, more empathetic, and put ourselves in the shoes of other people—cross the board, whether it's disability related or not, right? You know, to me, timely is, you know, a week, two weeks, and then then you're off and running again.

[Music: fades out]

Well, rolling in my situation. But it should not take years to get a ramp or a stair lift. If you qualify. You know, what if I was the person that says, "Well, you know, you can use the main floor, we'll see how it goes with the basement. You know, like, we'll decide. You know, if you're using all your space in the main floor, *maybe* you can expand to the basement, right?"

Meagan Miller: Yeah, a weird trial period.

Zachary Weeks: Yeah, right? And, we'll decide if, you know- and how much of the basement you can use. And even then, we'll let you know when you can use it. We'll do it in a timely manner.

Meagan Miller: I think what's so infuriating too, is that for the people that I talk to, like oftentimes, the housing provider doesn't even have to pay any money. All they have to do is-

Zachary Weeks: Sign off.

Meagan Miller: And yet...

[Music: "Circle Gerano", an ambient track, fades in]

Zachary Weeks: Stroke of a pen makes a world of difference, and it's impacting people's lives beyond what you can imagine, right? It's, yeah, I mean there, there needs to be stronger enforcement, better codes, stronger codes, stronger policies, stronger, like, pride in your work. Like this is what you're prideful of: The bare minimum? Com'on. Like jeez louise.

Meagan Miller: I want to be clear: We're not suggesting that Civida is intentionally denying people accommodations or acting out of malice. As a government-supported housing provider, they operate within strict rules and liability constraints. And this might mean they require specific documentation to verify a claim, or have to get approval from multiple offices before they can respond—even for a seemingly simple request. But these safeguards come with real consequences.

As the legal principle goes, "Justice delayed is justice denied." Even when accommodations eventually come through, the delay itself causes harm.

Skyler Morgan: They fought with me for six months about getting that ramp on my house. They didn't even have to pay for it. They just had to sign a paper saying it was okay. And then they fought with me about "Oh, you have to have an electrician come in and change out your light switches" and duh duh da duh. But you can't even tell me what kind of light switches to get.

[Music: fades out]

Because I wanted to convert it to the Alexa system because of my disability. I want to adapt things to my conditions. But you're giving me a problem every single time I try and adapt something for my physical needs.

Meagan Miller: This is Skyler Morgan. We heard her in episode one when discussing the importance of accessibility and affordability. As you might recall, she has fibromyalgia, which limits her mobility, and she also lives in a Civida two-level split.

Skyler Morgan: If we had a townhouse that was on the main floor, it would be better. But they said the only thing like that is an apartment. But I won't move back into an apartment. They're infested with bedbugs. They're infested with cockroaches. And I'm sorry, I don't like those kinds of bugs. You know, I've asked them and asked them to make things more accessible for me, like having a stall that's closer to my house.

So, for me to get through the parking stall, I have to go down those three stairs, on my walking device, which is a scooter, technically. To go down those three stairs, then I have to get into the parking lot and go around every car to get out to my car, which is on this side, because there's a little.

Meagan Miller: Just a note for listeners, Skyler made the motion of a dip with her hands to explain the barrier.

Skyler Morgan: I have to go to Boardwalk's complex to get to my house. I should be able to get in my own complex without having to go down a bunch of stairs all the time. So there's no curbs in this complex at all. It's dirty as hell. And there's glass everywhere. And, you know, like health reasons. Like, for a lot of us, there's black mold and a lot of the units. There's none in this unit, thank God, because I'm very clean. And I had a health inspector come in here and there was black mold at one point—they had to rip out a bunch of stuff in the bathroom. But that's the other thing: they're just so cheap. Like my bathtub needed to be replaced a long time ago. They enameled it and now it's chipping everywhere. So I have to pull it out of my hair all the time. And, with dreadlocks, that's hard, you know. And I've had so much problems with that bathtub since I got here. Like it's not even just the enamel is chipping. It's like. Every time I turn on the water, and I know there's a leak in there. But they tell me there's not. Well, I'm sorry. Everytime I turn on the water, I can hear the leak in the wall. Drip drip drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip. And the other thing: a lot of the units have yellow water.

[Music: "Throughput" fades in]

When I first moved in here, I had yellow water. I had to get them to come in and repipe the pipe. Because I wouldn't drink it. I wouldn't bathe in it. I'm like, I'm not staying here until you do this. And I said, "I will call the health inspector and I will have this unit shut down and the whole complex shut down." Technically this complex should be shut down.

Meagan Miller: I wanted to weave Skyler back into our conversation because her experience highlights another challenge: aging infrastructure. How bureaucracy doesn't just show up in paperwork or delayed approvals; it's built into the walls.

Most of Edmonton's community housing was built in the 70s and 80s. And, in the last episode, we discussed how the age of these buildings contribute to inaccessibility.

[Music: fades out]

But it also points to something deeper: a system that's been underfunded and neglected for decades.

Skyler Morgan: You know, everything is falling apart in this complex. So, it's very unsafe. And, I'm like, I've told them over and over and over what they needed to do. And it's like, it keeps falling on deaf ears or they just don't really give a fuck. But it's indicative of all levels of government. And this is a level of government here. This is government housing. It's funded by the City of Edmonton and the Government of Alberta.

[Music: "Calisson", a minimalistic track that features string instruments, fades in]

So they both need to be accountable and, right now, Mayor Sohi and Danielle Smith are slumlords. They are slumlords. Plain and simple.

Meagan Miller: It's really easy to see these as the failings of one housing provider or one administration. But we need to remember, it's not that simple. The delays and disrepairs we're seeing today — they're symptoms of a system that's been shaped by decades of policy decisions. And to understand how we got here, we need to take a step back, and examine the history of community housing in Canada.

Josh Evans: Many people trace the origins of community housing to the 1940s when the Government of Canada established Wartime Housing Limited. This was in the early 1940s and these were homes that were intended for people working in the wartime economy or and later for veterans who were returning from World War Two. A few years later, in 1949 the first public housing projects were established in Canada. These were in cities like Halifax, St John's and in Toronto, where Regent Park, perhaps the most widely known and talked about public housing project was built.

Meagan Miller: This is Dr. Joshua Evans

Josh Evans: I am an Associate Professor of Human Geography at the University of Alberta.

Meagan Miller: And for transparency, he's also one of my master's supervisors. His research focuses on disability and chronic illness along with housing as a whole.

Josh Evans: I began doing research on homelessness, and most people connect homelessness to a shortage of affordable housing.

[Music: fades out]

And many people would put forward the idea that housing is *the* solution for homelessness. So naturally, I've been moving to study housing, and community housing, in particular, as a way of addressing our houselessness crisis here in Canada.

[Music: the soundtrack to Farewell Oak Street (1953), which features brass instruments, fades in]

Meagan Miller: Community housing in Canada really started to take shape in the post–World War II era. And to understand what that looked like in practice, I want to take a quick detour to Toronto — specifically to Regent Park, which was designed to replace overcrowded and deteriorating buildings

[Clip from Farewell Oak Street] “Down came Oak Street. Down came the verminous walls, the unclean, unhealthy rooms, and down came the fire hazards, the juvenile delinquency, the drunkenness, the broken marriages. Something new, the nation's first large scale public housing project to be called Regent Park”

Meagan Miller: This is a clip from *Farewell Oak Street*. It's a documentary from 1953 that the National Film Board of Canada produced to show the benefits of housing redevelopment

[Clip from Farewell Oak Street] *Rents based on income. Kelly, the pensioner, \$29 a month. Brown, the truck driver, \$45 a month. Jakes the tool maker, \$75 a month. Brown, paying a little for Kelly. Jakes paying a little for them both, and the people of the city and the rest of the country putting in a share*

Meagan Miller: So, this film is definitely a time capsule for a different time. But it shows how community housing began as a way to address public concern over slum housing. And how it was intended to bring families into post-war prosperity.

[Clip from Farewell Oak Street] “They're all there, the Kellys, the Hansons, the Tweeds. 13,000 families, old and young, large and small, poor and not so poor”

Meagan Miller: What's clear here too, is that community housing was intended to capture a broader sweep of of people who are, you know, what we just call sort of ordinary working class families

[Music: fades out]

Josh Evans: Community housing has evolved significantly since then. And this followed different concerns that were raised. So not only

about the quality of housing, but also about the supply of housing. So, in the 1960s–late 1960s and early 1970s–there was growing concern about the shortage of affordable housing. And so the federal government and provinces began developing programs. And the outgrowth of many of these programs in the 1970s were some significant investments in non profit and cooperative housing. And these investments were really important. It was during this period that we saw a boom in the construction of housing operated by nonprofits and cooperative housing in cities across Canada. Later, concerns shifted slightly towards the affordability of housing. And, so in response, federal and provincial programs began to adjust to address the concerns regarding the actual affordability of housing for people on very low incomes. Now I should say, though, over this time, over the 1970s and 80s into the 1990s, these programs and the investments that followed were often very piecemeal. They're often very reactive and so while it's important to acknowledge the gains that were made during these periods, it's also important to acknowledge that today we have a community housing sector that's roughly 3.5 to 4% of the total housing stock. And so many people when they're reflecting back on the history of community housing in Canada, when they're describing the programs that were developed over the many decades. They often draw attention to that piecemeal and reactive nature of our community housing policy. And they often use terms like residualism to describe the character of the community housing that we've inherited after those many, many decades. This term residualism was developed to describe the fact that the stock that we have today, and the way it is operated, is really reserved for those who are most in need. And, in that regard, we have this very small stock that's housing of last resort, so to speak. Whereas in other countries, other more developed countries, we can find examples of housing systems with much larger proportions of social and affordable housing.

[Music: "Dusting", an instrumental track with pizzicato violins, fades in]

Meagan Miller: So even though community housing policy from the 60s onwards was always piecemeal and reactive, the 90s was hugely transformational.

Josh Evans: Many people apply the term neoliberalism, or the neoliberal turn in public policy, to describe this moment. But essentially, what we experienced in the mid 1990s was two things. First, the federal government devolved responsibility for many of the

federal housing programs that they were operating to the provinces. What followed that was deep cuts to funding that was directed to these programs. And that and those cuts continued from the mid 1990s onwards. And the end result was a significant reduction in the growth of community housing, in new supply, as well as a whole host of additional issues related to the way that programs operated and the quality of the housing stock itself.

Meagan Miller: And even through the federal government reinvested in housing in 2017, this has ongoing ripple effects.

[Music: fades out]

Josh Evans: So we have a scarcity of social and affordable housing in Canada, and an easy way to verify this is just to look at the wait lists for subsidized housing. So in a city like Edmonton, there's 1000s of people, and many of whom have been on those wait lists for years. So this scarcity just speaks to the lack of supply, or the shortage of supply of community housing. The second issue that isn't new, but has existed for many, many decades, is the affordability of community housing itself. And so many non profit housing providers really struggle to deliver units that are subsidized to the extent or to the degree that many households require. So here we're talking about those deeply subsidized units, and it's difficult for some non profit housing providers to deliver these units because they're concerned with the sustainability of their programs. And this sustainability is a challenge as a result of many of the cutbacks that occurred during that neoliberal moment, you know, 20, 25 years ago or more. Related to both of these issues is the quality of the housing stock. So much of this housing stock was constructed in the 1970s and 1980s and like any type of housing, to ensure its quality over time, requires investments. And lacking the funds and lacking those investments from governments, many of these housing providers in the sector have had to defer maintenance over time.

[Music: "Throughput" fades in]

And that has produced buildings and housing stocks that are in significant need of repairs. And this is an issue that's only growing over time.

Meagan Miller: It's clear that community housing needs more funding — but just as crucial is how that funding is allocated.

A lot of funding for community housing is directed towards new developments. And I get it, we need more housing and those projects are politically appealing. But that also means that existing housing stock can often get overlooked, especially when it comes to routine maintenance. Including snow removal. Here's Crista again.

Crista Christensen: So these are literally like the Columbian Icefields. Okay? Well, if I can't walk out my front door without falling on my ass and going ass over tea kettle, "Houston, we have a problem." Right? And they're aware of it. And you'll get excuses: "Well, there's no money in the budget." Or if you get them to come out and do it, it won't be till the snow starts to melt. And then they want to procrastinate even longer. "Oh, it'll just melt away." Yes. And then we end up with a Titanic for three weeks. My parking stalls' underwater. We can't get the garbage in the garbage bins. The sewer drains are plugged because they've been iced over because you didn't come scrape or clean the parking lot. So that's not accessible. I can't even get garbage to the garbage bin because there's no access without attempting to kill myself. But you take a look at all the other complexes, whether they're privately owned, or whether they're rented. I mean, they're clearing the snow. The father of my children, he lives in an apartment complex, just five minutes from me just on the other side of Manning. And they cleaned, last winter, four times they cleaned the snow out of that parking lot. And us? Nothing. I have people that won't even come visit me because they can't gain access to my unit in wintertime. Huge problem, right? So sending in emails is what Leanne Jo Bos did. She's on a different job now. But she was my case manager for the longest time for homecare. Excellent woman. Didn't even get a response out of Civida. Right?

[Music: "Circle Gerano" fades in]

Like phone the manager, phone, the site supervisor. "What do you want us to do about it?" Well, I'm handicapped, I have to have people come in and take care of me. They can't gain access to the unit because you won't come clear the ice and the snow away. The ruts were so big that they were three feet deep. I'm not kidding. It is absolutely wild. And then I'm sitting here hearing that they're building new housing and I'm like, timeout, you can't maintain the housing that you already have, that you haven't sold off. But we're just gonna build new housing. Okay, tell me how that's gonna work.

Meagan Miller: Bureaucracy isn't unique to community housing. Larger systems, in general, come with more red tape. It doesn't matter if you're dealing with government-supported housing or a large property management company. The more layers there are, the more steps things tend to take. And again, as I mentioned before, bureaucracy actually exists for a reason. There's good intent behind it. Standardization is supposed to ensure fair decisions. And hierarchical structures are designed to maintain order and accountability. And also, in the context of community housing, we can also point to bureaucracy as being the reason why the sector is more accessible than market housing, as a whole. So even though it sounds like bureaucracy is bad. It isn't inherently. The problem is that these systems are often ill-equipped to handle unique or complex situations. And, unfortunately, it places the burden on the individual to repeatedly prove their need. Which costs time and money.

Crista Christensen: I don't think people should have to reach out to lawyers, and agencies and get their doctors involved. And- that's not what doctors' jobs are. Doctors' jobs are not to sit and write letters for AISH or income support or housing. You know what the problem is. Fix it. Stop trying to delay it, we only have X amount of money to live off of and yet we have to pay doctors 100 to 200, in some cases, \$600 just to fill out a piece of paper to say "Hey, this is what we need." This system is broken. And it's very sad. And unless you're a fighter, you're not going to get anywhere in it. It took me two years just to get approval to get a ramp. Sorry, not a ramp, a lift. Right. And it's probably going to be another six months before it gets put in. I went through two surgeries without what I needed. That's hard, particularly if you don't have any friends or family to rely upon and it's just me. That's the sad part. And I'm trying to do the best I can with my MS and my diabetes and all my other health issues. And then plus you add my son into the works, and it's just like, wow. Most people just give up, right? Or their kids get taken from them because they can't take care of them, and they get put in a home. You know, it's just, we need to do better.

[Music: fades out]

And it's all joined and linked together. It is. Like, you know, people can run down Civiida housing. People can run down the government. But you need everybody to come together as a collective and a whole on how they're going to change this. And that's lacking, severely lacking. Because these agencies only get so much money. And then it's every man for themselves. And it's

the government really, that's ultimately made it this way, right? We can create dissension and chaos and turn people you know, against each other, then they won't be so focused on what we're not doing.

[Music: "Throughput" fades in]

And this is where accountability goes out the window.

Meagan Miller: After all these conversations, one truth stands out. Community housing wasn't designed to fail people with disabilities, but it wasn't designed for them either. What Crista and Skyler are navigating isn't just bureaucracy. It's a values problem.

[Music: fades out]

Because bureaucracy isn't just paperwork. It's about power. About who gets to say yes or no, and who's forced to keep asking. And too often, the people who need the most support are asked to do the most just to access their basic rights.

Making community housing more accessible can't fall on people with disabilities. It has to be a collective effort. From providers, policymakers, builders, and yes—to us—the public.

Zachary Weeks: Yeah, exactly. And I mean, need I remind you that, you know, disability is the only minority group that a person can join at any time throughout their life. Overall, if we're investing in proper, accessible housing, sooner or later, you're going to need it. Or a friend or a family member. Chances are nowadays, most people listening to this podcast will know, if not already know, someone with a disability. Cuz it's not a matter of if but a matter of when. And, you know, there's all these intersections. And, you know, we need to really come together as one if we want to move in the right direction. Move the needle in positive ways.

Meagan Miller: But here's the thing. The biggest barrier to accessibility isn't policy, or design, or even money. It's mindset: who and what we value. Because that shapes everything else. So, next time, we're going to explore how inaccessibility is an attitude problem.

[Music: "Hard Living", a bluesy instrumental track with a steady rhythm fades in]

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I'm Meagan Miller

Zachary Weeks: I'm Zachary Weeks

Meagan Miller: Thanks for listening

[Music: fades out]