



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Stouffville's Lillian Fodor is a senior who is receiving help from CHATS and its new tenancy risk reduction service to seniors program. The program helps senior citizens who are at risk of losing their tenancy due to hoarding behaviour or cluttered living spaces.

# CHATS helps seniors alleviate clutter in homes

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A sparkle lights up Lillian Fodor's kind eyes and there's a smile on the senior's friendly face.

That wasn't the case up until last week, the 67-year old Stouffville resident said with a delightful hint of French accent, a holdover from her Belgian heritage.

Au contraire.

Her home of 10 years, a cozy, subsidized one-bedroom York Housing for Seniors apartment, was chock-a-block with possessions.

Our brutal winter felled Fodor with a string of flu infections, colds and coughs.

She was weakened and overwhelmed.

"It was getting to the point where I couldn't keep up," she said. "I didn't have the energy. Stuff accumulated. It just backed up on me.

"I was really scared they'd throw me out."

The retired former Bank of Nova Scotia data control clerk explained

the self-imposed warehousing wasn't a habit or a hazard.

"I made paths through the apartment," she said with a self-effacing chuckle.

When the building superintendent visited to check on wiring, he saw the piles and stacks and simply looked his tenant in the eye.

The silence was deafening.

"I knew. There was a sense of shame. That's when the ugly head of this mess reared its head."

The superintendent assured Fodor help was available.

A York Housing staffer visited and contacted Community and Home Assistance to Seniors, best known as CHATS.

The call was timely.

CHATS had just launched a new tenancy risk reduction service to seniors program earlier this month.

The initiative provides support to low and moderate income York Region seniors at risk of losing their tenancy due to hoarding behaviour, cluttered living spaces, uncleanli-

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➤ MORE INFORMATION: Learn about the program or if you have someone to refer, contact CHATS at 905-713-6596 or e-mail seniorshelp@chats.on.ca

ness and unmaintained homes.

Program co-ordinator Alicia Maria Lue had a crew of three at Fodor's apartment last week.

"When I was assured I wouldn't be evicted and the CHATS people arrived, it was as if a 100-pound weight was taken off my shoulders," Fodor said.

"They're fabulous people. They saw my anxiety and made me feel comfortable."

The crew consulted with Fodor on what goes and stays.

"They're very organized," she said. "They filled an entire garbage bin. I'm very pleased.

"They helped me when I couldn't help myself."

Offered in partnership with York

Support Services Network and VHA Home HealthCare, the service is funded by York Region.

The goal is to support up to 40 clients.

CHATS provides extreme cleaning, minor repairs and clutter reduction to create safer living environments, advocacy regarding tenant/landlord issues and short-term therapeutic intervention with an occupational therapist.

Case management, with a specialized geriatric mental health case manager for mental health issues associated with any hoarding and longer term case management to ensure connectedness to community support, is also offered as required.

For many seniors, hoarding or an extreme attachment to acquiring and holding on to "stuff" is becoming a serious psychiatric and community problem that is grossly undetected and untreated, CHATS CEO Christina Bisanz said.

The situation puts "people at

serious risk of losing tenancy due to dangerously cluttered, crammed and unmaintained homes that don't meet public health standards," she said.

If the behavior is chronic, a harm reduction approach, while not perfect, is a manageable option, VHA client services vice-president Barbara Cawley said. She notes the approach focuses on clearing enough clutter and refuse out so walkways are clear and the senior reduces the risk of eviction, falls and other hazards, such as fire.

With a confirmed lease on her home and a new one on her life, Fodor is buoyed.

Her advice for a complex problem is simple.

"Don't be ashamed or scared," she said. "Reach out. Although I should have called earlier, I feel so much better now than I did a few weeks ago.

"They make you feel like you're not alone anymore."

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