

Managing rental housing for people disabled by multiple chemical sensitivity

by Andrew Eriksen

This article outlines several special issues when managing housing projects for people with environmental illness. It is part of a series of articles about multi-unit housing for people disabled by multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) and electromagnetic hypersensitivity (EHS).

The environmentally ill as a group

People disabled by multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) or electro hypersensitivity (EHS) are a unique clientele, unlike people with other disabilities.

People with these disabilities often have great difficulty finding accessible housing, due to their extreme sensitivities to many substances that are barely even noticed by the general population. In recent construction, the building products offgas a wide range of noxious fumes which may make the house uninhabitable for a decade or more.

In existing housing, prior renters' use of cigarettes, fragrances, pesticides and other chemicals will usually have contaminated the building, and mold may also be present.

People with environmental illness are not all the same, there are great variations in their sensitivities.

Most people with MCS can agree that pesticides, fragrances and most conventional laundry products make them sick. But some enjoy using essential oils, while others are sickened just being near a person wearing them.

Some have pets in their home, while others get sick being around them.

Some people cook outside on a hot plate because cooking odors bother them, while this is not a problem for others.

Some people are so sensitive that they are sickened by clothing that has been worn while inside a store or public restroom.

This is similar to allergies, where there is also great variation among people.

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A number of other issues can be a problem for some people with environmental illness. The reason is not known, but probably related to damage to their neurological systems, which makes it difficult to adjust to changes in their environment.

Examples of common sensitivities:

- heat and/or cold
- light
- noise
- vibrations
- natural smells (such as flowers)
- electromagnetic radiation (EMF)
- chemicals (household products, personal care products, etc.)
- pollen
- mold
- drafts (especially from air conditioners)
- dust
- cooking odors

The first years

Any new construction or remodeling will produce fumes and odors from the new materials. This is the case no matter how well the materials were chosen and installed. The difference is that a conventional building might take well over a decade to become usable, while non-toxic construction may take from a couple of months to a few years.

During this initial period, vigorous ventilation is essential. Cross-ventilation with wide open windows is the preferred method. Some projects have sped up the process by keeping the indoor air temperature above 100°F/38°C for weeks at a time.

In the first couple of years, it may only be the less sensitive people who can move in. As the apartments become more offgassed, more sensitive people may start to move in. Be aware of this possible trend, as these more sensitive people may complain about issues that did not trouble the first generation of lesser sensitive tenants.

Mixing with other groups

People with environmental illness must live segregated from the rest of the population, including people with other disabilities.

Some of the early projects were apartment buildings, where some of the units were converted, while people without environmental sensitivities lived all around. This did not work so well, as the neighbors' activities, dryer exhaust, etc., put substantial restrictions on the people with environmental illness. Some were basically confined indoors.

Renting out to other people, with various stipulations, will probably fail. People do not like to adhere to rules that do not make sense to them. When people are told that using certain products make their neighbors ill, they are still usually very resistant to change. Brand loyalties and other mechanisms are very difficult to overcome.

Try-out period

There is no house in existence that works for all people with environmental illness. No matter how well designed, built and maintained a dwelling is, there will be people who do not do well inside.

Prospective tenants will often have to travel to see an apartment. That means they will get exposed to various substances en route and arrive not feeling well. In that condition, they may not be able to tell if they can live in the apartment. They will need to stay in it for some days to see how they feel.

Sometimes they feel okay in the beginning, but after a month or so get sensitized to some building product or mold in the apartment. If more than one apartment is available, the prospective tenant may do better in another one.

It is best if the policies of the place recognize these particular needs by offering daily, weekly and monthly rates. Or offer a full return of the deposit within the first couple of months.

Short-term or long-term renters

Some projects are intended for short-term rentals, perhaps a few weeks or months, while the renter is being treated at a medical facility. Other projects are specifically for permanent residents.

Even though the short-term places may charge a rent equal to that of a nice hotel, many of them tend to gather a population which lives there long-term.

Consider offering long-term rates as well as short-term rates.

In some cases, rentals have later been sold off as condos, creating a mix of short-term rentals and permanent residents.

Seasonal effects

Some tenants may do well in the apartment during some seasons, and not so well in others.

The obvious explanation may be pollen, but it can also be the temperature or humidity affecting the offgassing of the apartment. When it is hot, building materials and their contaminations will offgas at a faster rate than when it is cold. This can make a difference in the wellbeing of the tenant.

The summer makes it easier to vigorously ventilate the apartment, unless the outdoor air quality is terrible. Another option is to run an air conditioner to keep the inside cool and thus less offgassing. The winters are difficult for some people, as there is less ventilation from open windows.

House rules

Special house rules are essential for a multi-unit environmental housing facility. They need to be very specific and clearly written. Each tenant must be given one before or upon move-in.

There are many levels of sensitivity. Some people tend to only use safer products to the extent they need to for themselves, or they simply feel bad all the time and are not aware that certain products contribute to their constant pain.

Less-toxic products often cost more than regular products, which discourages some people from using them. Not all less-toxic products are safe; some contain essential oils which are problematic, for instance.

The products and habits of one person may be harmful to the neighbors, even at a substantial distance.

Another reason for house rules is to protect the apartments from contamination. This author knows of three cases where a tenant contaminated their rental unit to the extent that it could not be rented out for a year or more, and substantial effort was needed to remedy the contamination.

Many problems can be avoided by having detailed house rules in place. This topic is dealt with in detail in a separate article by this author. It can also be helpful to look at the house rules for similar housing facilities.

Use of outdoor spaces

The renters will need access to outdoor spaces, as open air may make various activities much more possible than inside enclosed spaces.

This may include:

- receiving packages
- receiving visitors
- reading books
- offgas newly purchased goods
- sleep outside during maintenance or other contamination
- work with a computer (to vent off fumes)
- cooking (if sensitive to cooking odors)

The outside air may simply be better than inside the apartment, especially in the first years.

Not all the listed uses are possible or allowed in all existing housing projects.

Laundry uses

Sharing laundry machines is a frequent cause of conflict among tenants. The laundry products used by one person may leave a residue that contaminates the clothes of the next user.

The aerosols/fumes generated from a laundry product may bother some people to the point that they must use the laundry on separate days. And this may even be when using non-toxic laundry soaps, that most people with MCS have no problem with.

These problems are generally solved in a variety of ways, such as some (or all) apartments having designated machines, sign-up sheets, private agreements, etc. The manager may need to mitigate such issues.

A list of approved laundry products is very helpful. A list of banned products is absolutely essential.

Linen and cleaning services

Some of the housing facilities cater to short or medium-term renters and offer linen with the room. The linen may be changed by staff who clean the room on a weekly basis.

In some places, linen is supplied, but the tenant is responsible for washing their own linen, and cleaning their own room.

The places intended for long-term stays typically do not offer these services.

If offering linen and cleaning services, some people will not tolerate the products used and will need to opt out. One place offers that the floor is simply mopped with water, no soap.

EMF issues

Some people with MCS are also electrically sensitive. That means they may get symptoms from the radiation from cell phones, computers, wireless networks, cordless phones, household wires, refrigerators, TVs, etc. This radiation is not stopped by walls and ceilings.

Some are also bothered by noise, to the point it can create symptoms as well. Examples of problem noises are a refrigerator, the neighbor's television or air conditioner.

People who “only” have MCS may not have much understanding of these people's problems, and not be willing to turn down their TV, go outside to use their cell phone, or use a cable to hook up their computer.

These are issues that will have to be dealt with by mediation and policies, preferably up front in the house rules.

Maintenance

Upkeep is an essential part of managing a building project, but it is complicated as people with MCS generally do not tolerate new materials and fresh paint.

Even outside maintenance can be a problem, especially painting.

Inside maintenance is very difficult, as it may mean the tenant cannot live there for a while, perhaps not for many months.

Even materials specifically marketed as non-toxic and even “safe for the chemically sensitive” are often problematic when new. Some people are simply sickened by those materials for months or even years after they have been applied.

Keep several sheets of drywall on hand and stored with all their sides exposed to the air, so they can offgas. They cannot be stored together with paints, oil, gasoline or where natural gas is used, as the drywall will absorb the fumes and become unusable.

Inside maintenance should be deferred until the apartment is vacated, if possible. Otherwise the choice of materials and procedures should be discussed with the tenant, and the tenant given the option of moving with at least 30 days notice.

Some maintenance may be deferred to a time when the window can be open all the time, to air out the place and make the apartment tolerable faster.

Molds

Mold can make an otherwise safe house uninhabitable, even in the desert. Even if they cannot be seen or smelled, molds can build up inside walls, insulation and wooden cabinets where they emit their spores and noxious gases, which people with environmental illness are often particularly sensitive to.

The presence of some types of mold can be objectively verified with mold plates, which are available from a number of clinics and businesses catering to people with environmental illness and allergies.

It is very difficult to eradicate mold. It may require replacing drywall and other building products, which due to their newness then become a problem. Ozone does not eradicate mold, as it does not reach the parts of the colonies that are inside the building material.

The best method is prevention. This means to quickly repair leaky roofs, leaky pipes and isolate places where condensation occurs. Adequate drainage around the building should also be ensured, to avoid any flooding.

Otherwise, bring in a mold specialist. Much preferably one who also understands MCS.

On-site manager

Most of the existing projects have some sort of on-site manager. In many cases, it is the owner of the facility.

The on-site manager shows available apartments to prospective tenants, receives requests for repairs and looks after general upkeep. She may also receive rent

payments, keep the books, hand out linen and sell bottled water and approved laundry products.

As the on-site manager may need to enter the apartments and generally interact with the tenants, it is highly recommended that he or she lives a semi-non-toxic lifestyle. At the very least, he or she should refrain from using any fragranced personal care products, fabric softener, etc. And be a non-smoker. When hiring the manager, these requirements must be made clear up front and are best included in the contract. People can be very attached to these products and very resistant to foregoing their use, even when told they harm their tenants. It is easy to make up excuses. Common ones are: “it’s only a little bit” or “it can’t possibly be such a big deal” or “I should be allowed to do what I want”.

The manager may also be called upon to mediate in conflicts between renters.

Training of the manager

In most cases, the building manager is already very familiar with the needs of people with MCS. The manager may have the illness herself or have a family member with MCS.

If the building manager is not intimately familiar with the needs of people with MCS and EHS, he or she will need training. This clientele is unlike any other, including people with other types of physical or mental disabilities. It is not acceptable that the first people who move in have to educate the manager. This will cause many problems as the renters have little ability to persuade a skeptical manager who holds substantial power of harm over the tenants.

It is essential that the building manager is trained by someone from the outside who is in a position of authority. This could be a physician or an experienced manager of another similar housing facility. A mentor relationship on an ongoing basis would be best.

The author has lived in two MCS housing facilities in Texas and has visited several others. He has served as assistant manager of one MCS housing facility.