

The Right to a Roof:

Affordable Housing

In Ontario

Presentation to
Interfaith Social Assistance Reform
Coalition (ISARC)
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Thank you to ISARC for once again bringing us all here to remind those with a certain amount of power and prestige here in this seat of government what they have not done for over 10 years and what they absolutely must begin doing STAT (that's a nursing term)!

When City of Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman refused to meet with myself and the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee over a 6-year period I promised myself that I would say that in every public speech I made, and I did.

Minister David Caplan, Minister of Public Infrastructure, despite numerous verbal and written requests continues this pattern, perhaps trying to break a record. I am happy to report that Minister Papatello, Minister of Community Services, met quite swiftly with us once asked. After 12 months, we secured a meeting with Minister Gerretsen, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, just last week. These are the three ministers responsible for housing and shelter in this province. I don't think Ministers Papatello or Gerretsen are any worse off for having met with us – hopefully they are somewhat more informed – how could you not be after meeting with someone like John Andras or Michael Shapcott?

My mother recently reminded me of something she dug out of her files that my daughter wrote when she was in high school:

"We should not be shy when demanding to be part of the democratic process: it belongs to us as any politician or government body: we have ourselves to blame for allowing politicians to do what they have.

Omission is submission is permission."

Idella Sturino

Well, ISARC is definitely not shy! It is right that we are here today calling for housing. The last time I was here doing that I was arrested. But I'll tell you about that later.

Now let me read something by someone you all may know – Reverend Brian Burch:

We know what heaven is like. "In my father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? (John 14:2). And we know what Toronto is like. In our city are many heating grates; in our city

are many file folders full of names of our sisters and brothers seeking a home. In the midst of our city are many trying to bring to life in the present heaven's promise. This is done through protests and petitions. It is done through opening up sanctuary spaces for temporary resting places. It is done by squatting empty buildings. And it is done by those that weave together funds from various sources to develop new housing." *Rev. Brian Burch, homily given March 20, 2005*

I'm going to come back to these words because I think it's critical we look at our strategies.

- What is working and achieves some success?
- What kind of strategies need more support and what is the role of the faith community?

Just over a year ago I was given a gift of not just money but of trust when I was given a 3-year fellowship from the Atkinson Foundation. It liberated me to work on housing and homelessness issues in a way that you can imagine a nurse can't often do, with pressing demands in a community health centre.

My over riding mission is to: "***inspire and engage Canadians from all walks of life, to empathize and respond to the injustice of homelessness in their community and motivate them to become involved in calling for the solution – a national housing program.***"

Now, I know I'm preaching to the converted here today, but at the same time it's always helpful to be reminded perhaps in different ways why we need to fight for housing. I come at this as a nurse and from having known so many people over the years that are homeless and seeing the indignity, the suffering, the conditions, the deaths. My yoga teacher always ends the class by thanking us and saying that we teach her every class so I'm sure I'll learn from you today as well.

I want to describe in broad strokes what I'm working on. Then I want to suggest some strategies and tactics both in the past and present that I believe are brilliant and have made or could make a difference.

This is what I'm working on:

Critical Projects on the Ground

1. the shelter conditions (crowding, not enough spaces, the city's reliance on the volunteer and seasonal Out of the Cold program)
2. the outdoor sleeping, the squats, the policing and social control of outdoor sleeping
3. the plagues – the traditional flus and colds, lice and scabies are child's play compared to what we now face: tuberculosis outbreaks which have caused death and infection of shelter workers, new and emerging viruses like the Norwalk virus, the threat of repeat visits of deadly infections like SARS or a pandemic flu or the new super bugs, and infestations like bedbugs
4. the high death rate and need for palliative care

I do this work through various means – through networks like the Street Nurses Network, or through more legitimate avenues - I'm now a Toronto Public Health Board of Health member, and of course through coalition work such as with the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee.

The National Picture and Outreach

I have chosen to look at homelessness in other communities but do so only when there is also a way I can add support to the work of local activists and coalitions. So this past year, in Ontario, I've been to places like Sudbury, Guelph, Windsor, Hamilton, Kingston, Ottawa and York Region. In some cases I've toured the community, talked to front line workers, held press conferences or worked with media to highlight their local situation. Common in all these communities is inadequate shelter capacity for women and children, serious concerns about disease, high death rates and of course waiting lists for social housing that range from 3-10 years long.

Social Determinants of Health – bringing them to life

I've been working with groups ranging from the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario to schools, to the faith community trying to highlight very specifically why housing is a health issue, why a housing program is as important as Medicare

and to involve these groups in our campaign. The RNAO has now passed a resolution on housing, developed a policy statement and nursing students all over the country are engaging in course work related to housing and even projects where they join us in our actions such as the Great Sleep Out.

Housing

I decided very early on that I must somehow be involved in promoting particular groups that want to build housing and be intimately involved in at least one project myself. So, I am working with the Furniture Bank as they further their plans to build at 200 Madison and I've used every opportunity I have to push housing. I've taken Minister Fontana on a tour of some housing projects, I recently invited Minister Gerretsen to do the same. My April newsletter will highlight a number of these projects.

Political Engagement

This is work at all three levels of government and it includes specific work with politicians and political processes at each level but also work to determine how others can become engaged in the political process. So, although few doors have been opened at Queen's Park, there has been significant improvement in gaining access to meetings and ways of working with people at the City and in Ottawa. Lots of this federal work occurs within the context of two of our national groups – the National Housing and Homelessness Network and the National Coalition on Housing and Homelessness.

Book Project

This is an oral history project where I am interviewing a number of people who have been homeless and who I have been particularly close with. A chance to show them "upright, active, engaged, struggling", not on the grate as has been the expected norm in popular media.

My Newsletter

I write a monthly newsletter that goes out electronically and I want to read

something from the April issue. I wrote this particular newsletter because January, February and March were dark months. In fact I was heartsick by the sequence of events. So, I realized this in myself, wanted to acknowledge it but create a vision of hope and that means talking about housing.

I'm happy that spring is here and hope it will bring renewed energy and action on the housing front. After all, the word spring can mean *"foundation, come into being, emanate, grow, develop, uprising, come unstuck, burst forth....."*

This issue of my newsletter is all about housing – here's why.

It's hard to not feel dejected by what was a very hard winter that seemed beset with disappointments. There was no new money for housing in the federal government's February budget. Incredulously, **despite government promises**, finance minister Ralph Goodale refused to put money in the budget, saying that the logjam in Ontario had to be cleared before any new money would be committed. So, in fact our Ontario government is NOT ONLY holding up new affordable housing in this province to the total of \$1.796 billion dollars – but ALSO ALL across the country. At the municipal level, Toronto City Council passed a by-law which criminalized being homeless by making it illegal to sleep at city squares, including Toronto's City Hall square. Within days, homeless people who considered the square a safe place to sleep were harassed and moved on. Within weeks City workers ventured further and left an eviction notice at a youth squat under the Gardiner Expressway, the squat was ultimately bulldozed. Reports of police targeting homeless people in the downtown east end began to increase. Police cars, pepper spray and tasers are now discussed in the popular media as new tools in the police toolbox, to contain or control people creating disturbances.

These intentional directions by policy makers hurt people. They remind me of how dejected I was back in the year 2000 when similar policy decisions led to worsening homelessness, suffering and an extraordinary number of homeless deaths. At that time I wrote the following:

"My bandages no longer cover the wounds of my patients. My vitamins will not prevent the white plague of tuberculosis from taking another victim. I cannot even help someone achieve one peaceful night of safety and sleep. Only roofs will do that, **and I am not a carpenter.**"

Occasionally, after so many setbacks and attacks to our efforts to win housing and basic shelter for people, it's hard to imagine success or policy changes that might actually help people. Then a friend recently reminded me, some of the biggest social justice wins (ending apartheid, the vote for women, ending the Vietnam War, to name a few) took years, sometimes decades to achieve.

Well, I'm still not a carpenter but I do plan to build housing. I am not alone. Here

are some fabulous examples of people and groups trying to do just that. These are a sampling of the groups that eagerly prepare, fundraise, hope and in some cases pray to build real housing in the near future. In common, across this country, we would all like to see a national housing program.

So, then I go on to describe numerous housing projects that are dreaming, fundraising, praying for a national housing program so they can bring their project to a groundbreaking stage.

I now want to describe to you a bit of history, a history of successes.

Strategies/Decisions/Actions that worked! (*note these were elaborated on)

- The Freezing Deaths Inquest. (use of inquests, political and judicial processes, media, policy outcomes)
- Disaster Declaration and the 1% solution. (formation of TDRC, the 1% solution, from the local to the national)
- The snowstorm and Mel Lastman and the army. (opening of the armouries as a precedent for emergency shelter)
- Tent City support, the pre-fabs, the prohome. (Disaster Relief, housing, community building, the win of the rent supplement program)
- Deer Park United. (their decision to close the Out of the Cold and shift to housing work)
- The Secret Video. (in Street Nurse, concept later applied by TDRC using equipment and public release of images)
- TB or not TB. (public inquiry as a means to engage people, prepare for inquest. Other examples include inquiry into Seaton House)
- Shelter Inspection Team. (report, UN standards, leading to Shelter Standards)

- The Great Sleep Out (City Hall then Queen's Park)
- The tent-like structures. (use at Queen's Park to demonstrate need for shelter and housing on National Housing Day)
- DuraKits in York Region. (concept of pre-fabs for individual family use in a shelter – changes nature of congregate dwelling in shelters)
- The Diet Clinics. (OCAP organizes Nurse Practitioners, Midwives, doctors – assisting social assistant recipients to receive special diet allotments, up to \$250.00 per month)

I give you these examples, to remind you that we have had significant wins. We celebrate them but they are few and far between. When people ask me how I keep going, I tell them, it is because of history. I know these fights, I remember and honour these fights, and learn from them for the next time.

What next?

Medicare didn't come without a fight. Unemployment insurance didn't come without a fight. The ending of the Vietnam War didn't come without a fight. I remember fighting to not allow the death penalty to return to Canada and that was with big national faith groups. The vote for women didn't come without a fight.

Nothing for homeless people has come or will come without a fight also.

Democracy is not, is not, is not about a vote every 4 years. It cannot be viewed that way.

Chomsky says that the democratic tide is not eroded. Many of the wins we won, we still have. This is not the time to lie down. We must go to the streets. We must support rallies, press conferences, actions around housing and homelessness. We can no longer use the excuse that OCAP is a bad group, or TDRC doesn't work enough in the suburbs, or it's better to work with corporations to resolve our community's social needs. Both of these groups are movements true to the

people, to homeless and poor people, and lately, they get very little support, from unions, from churches, from social service agencies, from the left.

We must strengthen ourselves and we must support the very small advocacy groups that are like the David against the huge Goliath.

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