

Care Watch
Roundtable - Aging on the Street
Cathy Crowe, February 17, 2006

Thank you for inviting me to join your roundtable today.

Well, the street does age people. There's a clinical notation that health care workers sometimes use when they chart, describing a patient - it's "looks older than stated age". I stopped using that notation a long time ago. It's redundant.

I thought I would tell you about a few people that I've known to help explain the effects of homelessness on health – although I'm sure you can imagine most of them.

Alex

Alex was about 57 when I first met him. He was homeless, stayed at Seaton House or Dixon Hall most of the time and periodically outside. I could always tell when he'd been at the O'Neill Bath House because he would still have this thick white coating of soap all over his body. Everyone used to. He always drank. Over the years he became emaciated, more timid and unable to hold on to his money. He was repeatedly robbed, kicked and beaten on cheque day. I remember first learning from him that he had been raped the night before. I also remember the night he was found in a snow bank, having wandered from a room in a rooming house that I'd found for him. His core body temperature was very low. He was unconscious but miraculously saved in St. Michael's Hospital Emerg. I contacted the RCMP to help find his sisters who he was estranged from since the 70s.

Alex had been homeless for years. After the hypothermia incident I helped to find a safe place for him to live. He lived there safely until his sisters found him and tried to whisk him out by convincing his doctor to drug him for the plane ride with them.

He now lives in a seniors retirement facility. Once housed he never drank again. Not once.

Sonya

Sonya is an elderly woman who frequented various drop-ins sometimes the ones with men and women, sometimes the women only drop-ins. She immigrated to Canada decades ago, was married, and had children. She is now alone. Her husband was brutal to her. Her kids have not contact with her. She wears layers and layers of clothing, always a kerchief and uses a bundle buggy to carry her belongings.

She's shy, reluctant to sign up in the nursing outreach clinics to see the nurse, or ever to ask for anything, but she loves to show me her knitting, sewing and her prose writing.

Over the years, many years, she eventually tells me about her health, sees a doctor I recommend, then a heart specialist...and so on. She even reconnects with a housing worker and finally moves into a place of her own.....where she is so very lonely, she sometimes goes back to sleeping in the Out of the Cold program.

Sonya died last year.

Merv

I had lunch with Merv yesterday. Even though a half hour after our meeting he was going into a lunch program he still ordered a huge plate of food with me. Kind of like what squirrels do to prepare for winter.

Merv was homeless for a short period of time as a young kid when his father kicked him out but then spent the next few decades working at various jobs. He now reflects that his first experience prepared him for when he later became homeless in his sixties.

He thinks it's not right that a man should be forced to panhandle for enough spending money or food. He thinks it's not right that people should be crowded together in shelters or daytime shelters (drop-ins) for years. He thinks it's not right that so many people should have to sleep outside because they can't tolerate what happens inside shelters – your stuff stolen, catching diseases, having to sleep beside a snorer.

He's in housing now – a subsidized bachelor unit. He pays \$390 of his \$1100 pension for

rent. But the building is not so great. He was recently robbed.

But he takes the issue a step farther – he's happy to describe the challenges he faces but warns against dwelling on them. He follows the news and warns that without a national housing program people are not going to be able to move from homelessness to housing. He knows too well that no matter how good the homeless sector works to meet people's needs they will never, ever be able to meet people's needs. And he knows what that means – increasing hunger, poor health, deaths.

He knows more than 30 of the names on the Homeless Memorial list at the Church of the Holy Trinity. He says housing is a human right. He worries what will happen next.

A history lesson

Most groups I speak to don't know where our national housing program came from. I probably don't need to tell you that in the late 1940s, the advocacy efforts of women's groups, veterans' groups, the CCF to name a few led to significant steps towards a national program.

We must do everything we can to make visible that history. We once had a national housing program. Then, it was taken away. We won that program because of the dogged determination of these groups – vets, women, regular families. It was taken away from us and we must grab it back. We must make it as important a program as Medicare.

Where are we today?

Recently, we were very close to seeing the federal government spend \$1.6 billion (from the federal Martin-Layton budget deal). However, as you all know we moved into a winter election and we now have a new government – a Conservative minority government.

We don't know the status of the 1.6 billion today, we don't know the status of the SCPI money (Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative), we don't know who the Minister Responsible for Housing will be, and we don't know who the opposition critics will be.

We do know that the Conservative party platform on housing focused primarily on affordable home ownership and tax credits. Their platform was about 230 words and is described in my

What are we to do? (brainstorming and Q&A period about what people can do)

- Political engagement – visiting MPs – identify key MPs that are strategic to visit
- Advocacy workshops (letter writing, MPP and MP meetings)
- order some 1% buttons and wear them! The web site is on our button and I hope you'll check it out - www.tdrc.net
- Support advocacy groups
- For example: TDRC holds a monthly vigil, outside, at the Church of the Holy Trinity near the Eaton Centre where we remember homeless people who have died each month. Maybe you could join us and take part in it – bringing flowers, candles or helping to serve the meal afterwards.
- Housing projects – support local projects that can use your time, donations or advocacy
- Examine the role economics and globalization play in the changes occurring in Canadian social policy
