

**A national disaster, a national emergency,
a national disgrace.**

**Presentation to Poverty and Homelessness Forum
Cathy Crowe, Thunder Bay – June 1, 2006**

***We named homelessness a national disaster in this country
8 years ago! Last week the United Nations called it a national emergency!***

On October 8, 1998 the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC) held a press conference on behalf of hundreds of organizations across the country, including a Thunder Bay anti-poverty organization. We declared homelessness a national disaster. The disaster declaration launched a national campaign that called for two things: first, disaster relief monies to help communities deal with the immediate problem of homelessness. Second, we called for – the One Percent Solution – a commitment from all three levels of government to spend an additional 1% of their budgets on affordable housing.

In 1993, the Conservative government quietly cancelled our national housing program. Following the federal download of housing to the provinces, and in many cases another download to the municipalities, in a mere five years we went from a rich history of building affordable housing in Canada to a dramatic increase in homelessness that resulted in our Declaration. The history from that 1998 Declaration until today is a history of significant political wins on the housing and homelessness front. Given the current political climate, we have no choice but to keep building on those wins. Let me briefly outline some of those wins:

- With the October 8th Declaration, the ***Toronto Star*** ran front-page headlines and stories on homelessness for 11 days straight. They

assigned a journalist – Catherine Dunphy, to cover homelessness full-time – a first in Canada.

- TDRC's State of Emergency Declaration was taken to the United Nations in Geneva by two Canadian NGOs. The **United Nations** took the Declaration seriously. Both the UN Human Rights Committee and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights remarked on Canada's record on housing, poverty, and the treatment of First Nations peoples. Here is what the latter UN Committee said right after our 1998 Declaration:

“The Committee is gravely concerned that such a wealthy country as Canada has allowed the problem of homelessness and inadequate housing to grow to such proportions that the mayors of Canada's 10 largest cities have now declared homelessness a national disaster.”

- **Two national housing and homelessness networks were launched.** When Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman invited people from across the country to hear Dr. Anne Golden present the findings of his Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness – Taking Responsibility for Homelessness (aka the Golden Report) – TDRC, community activists and front-line workers took over city council chambers and we formed the National Housing and Homelessness Network – the NHHN. Around the same time, TDRC also joined with national organizations to form the **National Coalition on Housing and Homelessness.**
- **In 1999 a federal Minister Responsible for Homelessness was appointed.** Prime Minister Chrétien appointed federal Minister of Labour Claudette Bradshaw to the **new portfolio**, Minister Responsible for Homelessness – probably the first in the world – a federal minister responsible for homelessness. I should add that Ms. Bradshaw hated being called Minister 'responsible for homelessness' because in fact, the longer she was minister, the more it remained true. The existence of the 'Homelessness Minister' and in particular her national tour, did make visible the fact that a long list of ministers with responsibilities for

housing, including Diane Marleau, Alfonso Gagliano, David Collenette, John McCallum, Steve Mahoney, and even Joe Fontana, were never given a mandate or a budget to restart a national housing program. In fact, the federal Liberals used to boast that they would never get back into the housing business.

- ***Disaster Relief monies were announced.*** Claudette Bradshaw did announce federal disaster relief monies – the ***Supporting Community Partnership Initiatives (SCPI)***. Hundreds of millions of dollars were targeted to alleviate homelessness, albeit only in large urban centres, which perpetuated the myth that homelessness was only a big city problem. However SCPI did provide much needed assistance to agencies providing relief to people who were homeless. As my friend and colleague Michael Shapcott says “the monies made people more comfortable in their state of homelessness, but no less homeless.” SCPI was renewed in 2003 for three years and again for one year. Its future is now in the hands of this new government.
- ***Affordable Housing Framework Agreement signed.*** In 2001, amidst a snowstorm in Quebec City and protestors from across the country freezing outside the Chateau, the federal government announced a housing agreement that would lead to federal partnerships with the provinces and territories. Although the program has been mired with difficulties and it is far from being any kind of a national housing program – it did bring the federal Liberals back into the housing arena.

Despite these political wins, abundant evidence across the country clearly shows that the housing shortage has worsened, waiting lists for affordable housing have lengthened and homelessness has increased. In addition, the racialization and feminization of poverty has meant that women and children, African Canadians and First Nations peoples, are today worse off than they were in 1998.

Today’s displaced Canadians, i.e. the homeless, remain economic refugees in their own country and they should be considered as such.

Let’s not call them couch-surfers, or ‘chronics’, street people, hard-core, or hard-

to-house. People who have been de-housed remain so much longer today than previously, and it is not by choice or through their personal fault. We have a serious shortage of affordable housing in this country and it is getting worse. The longer this is perpetuated, the more serious the consequences will become. For example:

- Hunger is now the primary health problem that Street Nurses confront. We refer to this as a major health concern, a medical emergency – or a hotspot. Hunger is epidemic. The recent provincial regulation changes to the Special Diet campaign removed the ability for thousands of people to receive additional food monies to treat that hunger.
- Inside emergency shelters there are more children, more seniors, more people with disabilities, more people with chronic health problems – and now more people requiring palliative care, than there have ever been before. At least two shelters in Canada have been forced to set up some form of hospice or palliative care for people who are homeless. Yes, people are dying homeless. Coroners continue to label many such deaths as death from ‘natural causes’, as if it’s natural to be dying on the street or in a 600-bed shelter. I continue to remain astounded that the high number of homeless deaths in Toronto, Ottawa , and even Sudbury , with the sound research of Dr. Stephen Hwang, has not yet led to an official inquiry by the office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario , whose mission statement is after all “We speak for the dead to protect the living.”
- Disease, and the potential for disease, is enormous. Phrases like ‘plagues, scourges, emerging viruses and pests’ may sound like its coming from another century, but it is the best descriptor of what homeless people are facing today. Disease onslaughts are cyclical in nature, but they more frequently erupt when social disasters like unemployment, overcrowding, hunger and homelessness devastate a community or a country. For example - shelters have had to deal with deadly tuberculosis outbreaks. Shelter workers have had to testify at inquests into the tuberculosis deaths in their shelters. Cases of active

TB have even been reported among staff in at least one Toronto shelter.

- And there are new and emerging diseases. And believe me, the worst is yet to come. Some shelters have had to enact quarantines – when the highly infectious Norwalk virus hit their population. During SARS, front line workers were terrified that SARS would enter the shelter system. They knew that ‘home quarantine’ plans would be impossible to implement in shelters and it would be totally inadequate. There is no surprise that these facilities are the sites that are the most concerned and the most willing to prepare for an upcoming pandemic flu – if they were given the direction, the information or the funding to do so.
- The term ‘pests’ does not begin to capture the nightmare of bedbugs. Many shelters and rooming houses are infested with them throughout Toronto. Bedbugs are more than a ‘nuisance’, which is what public health authorities call them. They are a very serious health problem, which take a toll both physically and mentally. Bedbugs are a stubborn pest that can live up to 12 months without a human feed.

This is all just a sampling. I could describe many similarly horrific rooming house conditions and other issues that impact people sleeping outdoors.

Over the last 2 years I have been invited to a number of communities across the country, to learn from local experts about what their issues are. I have been startled to learn about the prevalence of 3 problems that I thought were unique to Toronto.

1. Many municipalities have had to sign contracts with motels to ensure there are enough emergency shelter spaces in their community for homeless families with children. One Toronto school has been pressured to put a cap on the number of homeless children they will allow in their school. With only one exception, every community I have visited in the last two and a half years has not been able to meet the

emergency shelter needs of families and children.

2. Many of the communities I have visited also report a high homeless death rate – which should be cause for concern for public health officials, for epidemiologists, for city officials, and as I've mentioned, for the Chief Coroner of Ontario as well as other regional coroners. The problem by and large goes ignored and unstudied.

3. Signs of discrimination. I thought the vicious NIMBY (not in my back yard) people were only in Toronto – this is not so. Communities have told me that NIMBY people target the housing projects they try to build, projects that would house people with mental health problems or refugees or even poor families. We've also seen other examples of discrimination: by-laws making it illegal for homeless people to sleep in certain places, provincial legislation that criminalizes panhandling, new government funding criteria that prohibits the delivery of 'survival supplies' like sleeping bags or food to people living outside. Then there are the derogatory media references about homeless or poor people. In his May 8th column, Toronto SUN columnist Peter Worthington wrote, and I quote “ Toronto's worst blight, which colours attitudes of visitors and inhabitants, is the horde of bums who infest the city. Toronto panhandles_(sic) are not the truly down-and-out, but mostly like predators.” Astonishingly, he went on to write “Where do the homeless go if you clean up the streets? Probably they go home.”

These are all dangerous developments that threaten human life and dignity and absolutely, it must be a wake-up call to all of us as activists, front-line workers and policy makers. We need to confront what Josephine Grey calls the “willful ignorance” of our governments to deal with this problem. Josephine has testified before the UN in Geneva more than once.

So, we've had 8 years to make a dent in the homelessness disaster. We have had a few wins over those years, but the situation keeps getting worse, with growing numbers of people facing desperation and despair. So, the obvious question is why? It doesn't have to be that way.

Professor Ursula Franklin suggests that natural disasters such as the 1985 Mexico City earthquakes that killed 10,000 people, evokes solidarity and tolerance. We have witnessed other landmark Canadian versions of the earthquake, for example the Eastern Ontario and Quebec ice storm, the Manitoba floods, the Mississauga train derailment. All of these catastrophes led to both a shelter and a re-housing response.

In such a disaster, political and social divisions are put aside and people focus on providing solutions to the injured and the homeless while at the same time addressing prevention, which, in the Mexico case – included improved use of geological knowledge and the role of the City's subway layout in the amplification of the shock waves.

The Ontario and federal government responded to SARS with “disaster relief” - \$20 million dollars – for hospital relief and for a tourism campaign, and then they commissioned several thick reports. It remains to be seen if the recommendations will be taken seriously. Today, governments are creating emergency pandemic preparedness plans that emphasize the hierarchy of the chain of command rather than major prevention efforts.

Governments in Canada still do not acknowledge homelessness, as a legitimate political earthquake. If they did we would see an organized tri-level government response to homelessness and it is **not** unrealistic to expect that.

Only last week the United Nations Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights released their report on Canada. In it they went farther than they ever have before, calling Canada's homelessness disaster and housing crisis a “national emergency” and calling on federal, provincial and territorial governments to meet their international obligations by “reinstating or increasing, where necessary, social housing programmes for those in need”. The Geneva-based Committee's concluding observations, released Monday, May 22nd, state in Paragraph 62:

62. The Committee reiterates its recommendation that the federal, provincial and territorial governments address homelessness and inadequate housing as a national emergency by reinstating or

increasing, where necessary, social housing programmes for those in need, improving and properly enforcing anti-discrimination legislation in the field of housing, increasing shelter allowances and social assistance rates to realistic levels, and providing adequate support services for persons with disabilities. The Committee urges the State party to implement a national strategy for the reduction of homelessness that includes measurable goals and timetables, consultation and collaboration with affected communities, complaints procedures, and transparent accountability mechanisms, in keeping with Covenant standards.

Yes, there has been willful ignorance on the part of our government to deal with this problem. But it becomes harder for governments to ignore an issue like homelessness when it stares them in the face. Governments in Canada can only shut their eyes to the issue for so long. We now have the International Community tapping Canada on one shoulder, and you and I as local activists hammering away on the other, eventually, Canada will have to wake up to the problem.

My friend and TDRRC co-founder, Beric German, told me a story recently:

A few decades ago a woman couldn't afford a hospital birth. She lay on the table and her husband helped her deliver the baby and cut the umbilical cord with a knife. When Beric told me this story it was hard for me to grasp its relevancy. He went on to explain that we now understand and we know the need for a public Medicare system. He went on to remind me that a baby was born to a Tent City couple but that birth, even in a publicly funded Medicare system, did not occur in a society that also valued their need for housing. We expect and we demand a fully funded Medicare program. We must also expect and we must also demand a fully funded housing program.

In 1970 Tommy Douglas said, "We need a million new homes in Canada ". Now, I don't know the exact number we need now, but I do know this, we are going to have to fight for them.

You all know how we got our national health program – Medicare. The Tommy

Douglas story, recently shown on CBC, reminded us that it took a real fight.

But do you know how we got our national housing program? Surprisingly most people don't. I didn't, until recently. I was a Street Nurse in 1993 when they cancelled the national housing programme and I was not aware.

Let me read you something from the CBC archives from a 1946 radio broadcast.

“On news roundup, we brought to you reports about operations carried out by the services. There was Operation MuskoX, Operation Mustard and Operation North. Tonight we have a new one, something quite different. MuskoX took 83 days to reach its objective, this one took one day. It's called Operation Kildare. Don Pringle of the CBC tells you about it from Ottawa:”

“The smoke of the battle has cleared away on Operation Kildare. Well actually there wasn't any battle. The veterans and their families who took over two CWAC (Canadian Women's Army Corp) barracks in Ottawa met with no opposition. And now they are comfortably settled in their new homes and apparently intend to stay. Kildare Barracks and Annex are two houses of the old fashioned mansion-type that are not built anymore. There's a lot of room in them. In the Annex on chapel street for instance, there are three rooms in each of which you could hold a dance, a concert or a good-sized bizarre. I had a talk this afternoon with FE Hanratty who directed the occupation forces. He says that veterans were fed up with the red tape and procrastination of officialdom and they couldn't wait. Well it's true the veterans and their families wasted no time. The last CWAC moved out of the barracks on Monday and they came in Tuesday. Over a week ago, the newly formed Veterans Housing League marched on Parliament Hill. And last Friday, according to their leader, they presented the plea of 27 desperate families, to the City of Ottawa. Of these 27 families, 21 are now housed in Kildare Barracks. Some have three rooms, some have two. About half have private baths, and five families occupy what are, to all practical purposes, self-contained apartments. Mr. Hanratty says they are willing to pay a reasonable rent and this is what he

proposes: The rent should not be based on space occupied, but on ability to pay. And it should not exceed one fifth of the family's income. The average income, by the way, of these families is around \$127 a month. One man, a veteran of the first Great War, lives on a \$60 pension. So, says Hanratty, he should pay \$12 a month, no more. Well that's how it stands now. The veterans are in, and for the moment squatter's rights are respected. Kildare Barracks, by the way, is just across the street from another well-known Ottawa dwelling. Laurier House, as you know, is occupied by our Prime Minister. This is Don Pringle speaking from Ottawa." (CBC radio archives courtesy of CBC)

I'm telling that piece of history because people in Canada once fought, they fought very hard for a national housing programme. The housing crisis fought by World War II veterans was not limited to Ottawa. Protests by vets and their families also took place in Vancouver and there were protests across the country. Women's' groups joined in. It led to empty military buildings being freed up for housing; it led to a federal agency 'Wartime Housing Ltd.' that built 19,000 temporary rental homes over 4 years. It led to the creation of the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, now the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and what came to be our national housing programme.

Our housing programme was taken from us and we have to get it back. The last time Canada had a Conservative government; it was a majority government from 1984 to 1993. During that time our national housing programme was destroyed. There were almost \$2 billion in funding cuts over the decade, and then all new spending was cancelled in 1993.

The Liberal government, elected in 1993, was equally bad on their housing policy during the 1990s. Further cuts were made to housing funding, most national housing programs were downloaded to the provinces and territories in 1996, and the role of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation was further eroded in 1998.

Coming here to Thunder Bay, you can't help but notice the Sleeping Giant. My understanding of the legend is that the sleeping giant came about because the white man took away the people's silver. Just like our national housing program -

that's what happened in 1993, the silver was stolen from the people. But, as the legend goes, eventually the sleeping giant will awake.

And just like the sleeping giant, the people have to arise in the face of the growing despair and desperation around them. Sooner or later, the Canadian government has to wake up and be forced to do the right thing and join the rest of the G-8 nations and recreate a national housing programme.

Check with delivery
