

# **Coming Home**

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Cathy Crowe, Street Nurse

Atkinson Economic Justice Fellow

Thank you for inviting me, for this chance to come back to my hometown. I called my talk today 'Coming Home,' because this is where I was born and spent my early years. However, 'coming home' has another meaning for me. It's about making sure that every person in Canada can do just that – come home.

I spent some of my most formative years in Cobourg. I moved away at the end of Grade 9. However, there is no question in my mind that the kind of home I had here, the kind of community I was part of, influenced how I later looked at homelessness and housing.

I knew from the age of 5 that I wanted to be a nurse. Why? Well, I saw my mother going off to work, to the Emerg Dep't at the Cobourg General Hospital wearing her crisp white nursing uniform and cape. I sensed that to be a nurse was a good thing. But I knew too, that one of the only acceptable job options for a girl then was nursing. I could have been a teacher except I was petrified of speaking in public.

I've actually been many types of nurses – a cardiac nurse, a public health nurse, a camp nurse, a nurse practitioner. One of my hobbies is a collection of Harlequin style nurse books with job titles I've never had like "Cruise Ship Nurse", "Peace Corps Nurse", "Factory Nurse" and "Settlement Nurse".

But seriously, for the last 16 years I have called myself a Street Nurse. I use the term 'street nurse' because it tells a story. It tells a story of how things today are different than they used to be. It explains that this country now has a nursing specialty which is homelessness – and that, I suggest to you is obscene.

As a nurse, I have been part of two worlds. My earlier world was somewhat predictable – nursing in a hospital and then in the community. Then I became a nurse in another world and what I saw and continue to see are conditions that are not only unjust they are cause for national shame: tuberculosis outbreaks, malnutrition, mats on floors in shelters, not enough bathrooms or showers, I could go on and on. I've been reading a lot of Florence Nightingale lately, and it is quite shocking to see what we have returned to, given what is known in medical science about the links of poverty and crowding to

disease.

Although I ended up doing street nursing quite accidentally, there's nothing accidental about what has caused mass homelessness and poverty across this country.

You may be surprised to learn that the only thing homeless people have in common today is that they quite simply need affordable housing and better incomes. They have been dehousing by homeless making processes – removal of tenant protection laws, reduction of social assistance rates, tighter requirements to obtain disability benefits, employment insurance or social assistance, and a job market affected by globalization. I have not visited one community in the last year that has not been impacted by these policies.

People do not choose to be homeless, they are not all mentally ill or using drugs. Each person comes with a history and a story but in common they have lost their housing.

The biggest cause of course is the federal government's cancellation of its national housing program in 1993, followed by Ontario's cancellation of their provincial program in 1995.

It's important to recognize that in what we call the "golden years" of housing 1973-1993 before the federal government cancelled its program about 600,000 homes were created. In Ontario during our "golden years" from 1988 to 1995 an average of 7,350 new assisted rental units were funded annually.

I was part of a group (TDRC) that recognized that there was nothing accidental about the mass homelessness that had struck cities, towns and rural areas in the mid '90s, coincidentally following Ontario's 1995 cancellation of 17,000 units of affordable housing.

Homelessness had always been with us but the conditions we began to see in the 90s met the conditions of a national disaster. More than one-quarter of a million Canadians were homeless, tuberculosis had returned, people were stuck in shelters – or on the street for years, clusters of homeless deaths began to occur, squats and tent cities began to sprout and we witnessed visible homelessness – on street

corners, on grates, in towns on riversides, in empty cars and empty buildings.

We formed a group called the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, and we issued a declaration calling homelessness a national disaster. In fact Professor Ursula Franklin, declared at our press conference that “Homelessness is a man-made disaster.”

Specifically, what those men did:

- Federally from 1984-93 the men cut \$2 billion from housing spending and they cancelled all new spending and transferred housing to the provinces and territories
- In Ontario in 1995 the men cancelled all new housing spending including 17,000 co-op and non-profit units approved for development, welfare rates were cut and in 1998 housing was downloaded to municipalities.

It's no accident that the numbers of homeless people shot up in 1996, or that the death rate shot up as well.

In 1998 TDRC, issued a call for two solutions.

The first - emergency federal dollars to relieve homelessness in communities. That ultimately led former Prime Minister Chretien to appoint Claudette Bradshaw as the federal Minister Responsible for Homelessness and it led to the monies called SCPI (Supporting Community Partnerships Initiative).

The second, we called for the 1% solution – for all levels of government to commit 1% of their budgets to affordable housing – the number representing what governments had spent in previous years when we had a program.

Needless to say the last few weeks have been very exciting. But let me describe how TDRC works on various fronts.

We work on local issues that impact on homeless people, so we fight for more shelters, for better conditions, for a public health response to the bedbug infestations. We use conventional methods like

deputations and letter-writing and we use unconventional methods such as secret cameras or shelter inspection teams comprised of homeless people who measure space between mats on the floor to see if they meet the United Nations Standards for Refugee Camps.

Tent City was the largest and longest standing encampment of homeless people. It grew from a few people in tents to somewhere between 120 – 140 men and women, 14 dogs and a few cats. Over 50 shacks (no tents) including a sampling of pre-fabs and trailers, a source for running water, 6 portable toilets, a permanent shower stall, wood stoves installed in all suitable houses and portable showers.

It was the longest act of civil disobedience by homeless people in this country's history – illegally squatting on private land owned by Home Depot on Toronto's waterfront. Over a 3 year period TDRC supported Tent City providing infrastructure support such as the wood stoves and toilets, on the ground organizing support, and logistics around trying to negotiate new space to relocate the camp. Really, it's best if you see the movie Shelter from the Storm to really capture the flavour of the community but the campaign to save Tent City led to a huge victory after their brutal eviction and those people are all now in affordable housing – a victory that people across the country are still talking about. But it took a massive act of bravery by these people, protest and very unusual strategies to win housing for approximately 100 people.

TDRC also works on both the provincial and national levels and we coordinate the work of the National Housing and Homelessness Network. We meet with Ministers of Housing, we prepare pre-budget briefs, and we also hold rallies and build straw-bale houses outside of national meetings.

Now, let me come back to Cobourg. I was a pretty typical little girl. I played with dolls. I would use a cardboard box to make a dollhouse and I would divide it into bedrooms, put little pieces of doll furniture in it and call it a mansion. I used to play in all the new houses being built over east of Coverdale. I used to build forts in the woods behind my house. I had a strong concept of home, and never imagined people could be without one – at least in Canada. Today, I can tell you that in every community, I see and hear the same thing:

- There are 6-12 year waiting lists for affordable (social) housing
- Shelters are full, crowded, unhealthy and in some cases like Toronto, bed-bug infested
- There are not enough shelter beds for families, in particular for women and children
- Day programs that provide drop-in programs and food programs are overwhelmed, seeing double and triple the numbers
- Food bank shelves are frequently empty and restrictions are placed on users
- Homeless people are much sicker than they used to be. Why? Because they've been homeless so long. More have complicated and chronic illness such as heart disease, diabetes and Hepatitis C or HIV.
- New and emerging illnesses and threats create worsening health. Tuberculosis, the Norwalk virus, bedbugs. Imagine if SARS had entered a site of congregate living for 300 people?
- Many are dying. Many require palliative care.

At the same time, the organizations working to provide services face funding restrictions and 'NIMBY' neighbours who want their service shut down because it brings in "undesirables". Worse off are the organizations run by poor people themselves or consumer survivors who rarely get funding, donations or space to provide services.

I'm in an unusual position speaking to you today because there actually is quite a bit of news and progress on the housing front.

Political action, and by that I mean the varied efforts of many people and groups convinced the federal government to re-enter the world of housing. In 2001 they signed a federal-provincial-territorial agreement. A lot of money was promised and provinces had to match the money. That was the good news.

The bad news: promises are promises. If the federal and Ontario governments had honoured their promises there would have been \$716 million in total from 2002-2006 or in terms of units of housing – 14,320 units in Ontario. Well, that didn't happen.

For the year ending March 2002 – 22 new homes were created in Ontario. March 2003 – 23 homes. Up to March 2004 – 18 new homes. A grand total of 63 new homes for 170 women, men and children. These numbers come from the government's audited statement. A far cry from the Ontario Liberals' election promise of 20,000 units, 6,600 new supportive housing units and 35,000 housing allowances (rent supplements) for low-income households.

So, in reality, the program was stalled, up until a week and a half ago when a new deal was struck and signed committing in total \$602 million over four years.

So there is movement on the housing front. However, if there is no new housing money in today's Ontario budget then there will be no new housing for Ontario, since the federal dollars must be matched by provincial dollars!!

You might be surprised though that homelessness and the housing crisis is not just a big city problem. There's a problem right here in Cobourg, similar to that in communities this size across the country.

What's happening here?

- Plant closures that local labour and legal experts attribute to free trade and impacted on at least 1,000 workers. Large and small employers including:
- General Wire and Cable H & K Manufacturing St. Anne's Water Sci Can Scientific Imperial Bake and Serve Gaines Pet Food Diversey Water Technologies Budd Plastics Matthews Conveyers Cooper Tool FP Electronics Columbus McKinnon Centre Manufacturing Curtis Products.
- I know you lost your local welfare motel – Tom's and there were both single people and families living there. Where did they go?
- The Empire Hotel is being converted into a more luxurious venue. These are places where someone could live for \$300-500 a month.
- I know there is no shelter in the region.
- I know that people sleep on the waterfront because they are

- homeless. I know others live in empty cars or vans.
- Although you may see or hear about a lot of new housing going up in Cobourg – none of it is affordable.
  - Utility costs here, like in other communities are exorbitant and can lead to loss of housing through economic evictions.
  - Communities like yours have a reputation for being tough on people trying to get and stay on welfare.
  - The county is so large that it has 3 telephone area codes and the geographic spread means that not only are phone costs high, but travel costs are high, and for those without a car, well I understand your transit leaves something to be desired

Those are just broad strokes. What about the people?

#### Jean's story

Jean is a 50 something grandmother with health problems that prevent her from working. She was living in a basement apartment paying \$475 a month rent and getting \$520 a month from welfare. Finally, after a number of years waiting, she obtained a subsidized unit in county housing. It took her many applications and appeals (with help from the Legal Centre) to obtain a disability pension and now gets around \$700 a month while paying under \$200 a month for rent so she is now able to lead an almost normal life provided there are no emergencies. A local anti-poverty group, UP FROM THE ASHES paid for her phone and cable when she was in the basement apartment and paid for her phone in county housing until she got on disability.

#### Fred's story

Fred lives outside nearly year round. He uses his ingenuity to find indoor sleeping spaces in the winter. He has problems with his mental health and refuses to apply for disability. He has few choices in this community. He survives on what we call the \$195 – the amount a person may get if they're not in a shelter or housing.

#### Sue's story

Sue also has mental health issues. She hears and sees things that disturb her. She has been in and out of hospital and now lives in a room. The rent is \$475 a month. She receives \$536 from welfare. A local church helps pay part of her rent so she can still



survive. Although she applied for disability (which would increase her income to \$930 a month), she was not able to make it through the onerous application process.

### John's story

John is 50 and has physical health problems. He lives in a basement apartment and pays \$475 a month. He is on welfare and survives on \$520 a month although he suffered through many interruptions in his cheque. He is receiving retraining.

### This is your community

These stories are only a glimpse into your community. In a community this size, stigma and shame combined can prevent responses that are creative and respect people's dignity. I remember sitting in a Grade 5 class at Merwin Greer School in the 1950s and we were seated according to our grades. That simple act did a lot to separate us, to shame some of us, and to create teacher favourites who would get special attention. That would not be tolerated today. Hunger, lack of services, homelessness should be no different.

While it's important that we all think globally about these issues, and on a national and provincial level, when it comes down to facing the problem on our doorstep we have to act locally.

Thanks for inviting me here today and I'll be eager to hear news of your community.

*Check with delivery*