

Housing and Homelessness Plenary

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History

In the spring of 1998, we saw growing homelessness, (one-quarter of a million people across the country), and worsening conditions across the country including access to basic food and shelter, and a dramatic increase in morbidity and mortality among homeless people. In the face of all this, a group of people formed the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee.

In October 1998 we declared homelessness a **National Disaster**. We released a report titled the **State of Emergency Declaration (www.tdrc.net)**, and we called for two things:

First, that federal emergency relief monies be released to communities across the country so they could provide disaster relief for their homeless populations and;

Second, for a long term solution, the 1% solution – a national housing programme, where all levels of government would spend an additional 1% of their budgets to build affordable housing.

The first item essentially occurred. Prime Minister Chretien appointed Claudette Bradshaw as our first ever **Minister Responsible for Homelessness** and SCPI monies were rolled out across the country. So, Canada had the distinction of having a Minister responsible for homelessness but not a Minister with full responsibility for housing!

Now, this did little to end homelessness. As my colleague Michael Shapcott said “it helped to make homeless people more comfortable” in their state of homelessness but “they still remained homeless.”

The good news is that we no longer have a Minister Responsible for Homelessness but we do have a Minister of Housing – Minister Joe Fontana and there are definitely some steps forward towards a federal commitment to return to a fully funded social housing programme.

The bad news is that we are far from achieving the 1% solution.

The 1% solution originates from research done by Professor David Hulchanski who determined that when our federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments were allocating money to social housing they were spending on average 1% of their budgets.

So, that’s what we’re demanding and what we’re working towards. It is a huge national campaign that has been endorsed by many diverse groups across the country.

So, I wanted to use this time to talk about actions and directions that are needed. Each is tried and true and can be used or adapted in your community. They're meant to be food for thought and also an invitation for you to take action.

I'm going to give you 10 examples.

1. First of all our language.

No one is hard to house. It's the housing that's hard to find. Whereas Minister Bradshaw used to obsess around "the chronics" as she called them, and the need for "coordination of services", and "transitional housing and supports" for people, even though once "transitioned" they would have nowhere to go! On the other hand, Minister Fontana now recognizes that a continuum of housing options, not just shelter are a right of all Canadians. At least that's what he says.

In fact, in a recent PowerPoint used across the country during the federal housing consultation process, initiated by the Minister which just ended in February 2005, Minister Fontana and his staff used a picture of me with a quote: "No one is hard to house. It's the housing that's hard to find."

And in the house this week, the Minister stated:

"I believe housing is the foundation of individual dignity. Everyone in this country needs an address. Without an address, without a home, without a place where a person can feel comfortable, secure, where no one can ever take it away, where the kids can go to bed at night not in crowded conditions, not in unsafe homes, not in insecure homes but in homes where they can sleep so they can learn tomorrow morning. The men and women who are the working poor and who go to work each and every day fear that 30 days from now they may be out of a job or they may lose their house because they are paying 50%, 60%, 70% and 80% of their income toward housing."

2. How do we showcase the point that "no one is hard to house?"

I now believe it is critical that in all our communities we showcase local housing projects. Ones that were built years ago and ones that are now under development. That does two things: it directly and visually shows what the housing looks like, who the people are that now live there or could be living there. We, in fact, have the experience of developing housing in our country and we desperately want to still do that. So the federal government better cough up some money for programmes so we can do just that.

So how do we showcase housing?

- We can push and promote local projects when they go to municipal boards, committees or regional and city councils for approval. Fill the room, speak out in support. Say “Yes In My Backyard”!
- We can donate and fundraise for housing projects.
- We can take the media to these projects for a tour
- We can take our local politicians to these projects for a tour. For example, I recently took a somewhat conservative local Toronto City Councillor to a supportive housing project and we had breakfast with the residents; I took Minister Fontana on one of my disaster tours only I rejigged it to show him housing projects already built and some just waiting for money, where the groups have found a site and architects have developed plans and fundraising has started.

3. Champion the innovations.

When innovations occur they capture the public’s imagination. For example, we showcased several types of pre-fab houses at Tent City because they are a Canadian product that is used internationally for disaster relief housing around the world, usually after a natural disaster. In fact DuraKits will be sent as part of Tsunami relief.

We used DuraKits at Tent City for the man-made disaster of homelessness. They are cheap, sturdy and can literally be lifted off a flat-bed truck with a crane and plopped down on land.

This is fast, cheap and efficient housing that can immediately help people. The concept is currently being developed in York Region for individual housing and shelter use for families. It is brilliant, especially when you consider the health risks of keeping so many people in the abnormal conditions of forced congregate living that we find in a shelter.

4. Belinda Stronach.

We can use popular cultural moments. So for example, homeless and housing coalitions and projects north of Toronto in Ms. Stronach’s riding of Newmarket Aurora would do well to give her a little support this week. A letter of congratulations, a call to her riding executive and constituency office, followed by an invitation to tour some of their local projects and perhaps an offer to take her out on their Street Outreach van. Ms. Stronach is widely considered as responsible for the key budget vote yesterday and for 1.6 billion dollars for housing,

However, NDP leader Jack Layton put it there.

All of us across the country must now hound our MPs for that money to roll out.

5. Speaking of heroines and heros....

Who are your local heroes and how can you use them, draw them out to help you? We know who some of our Medicare heros are – Shirley Douglas for example. We don't have many famous housing champions so we need to draw them out of their artists' studios, or the movie set, or the hockey arena.

We're currently trying to entice a few famous Canadians to be involved in a forum on discrimination against homeless people and the need for social housing. We're also in the process of organizing a rock concert.

6. Media.

Recognizing that yes, there is a monopoly within the media and there is a certain agenda, there are nevertheless ways to work with the media. This involves for example:

- Cultivating relationships
- Offering and suggesting stories and assisting journalists with background work.
- Being willing and able to provide them with info on the record or a perhaps a memorable quote
- Being prepared to present to an editorial board and provide them with a homeless/housing 101 on the issue
- Tours. I took Michael Valpy on one of my first ever disaster tours for journalists.
- Writing your own stuff – letters to editor, opinion pieces
- Look at other forms of media: Convince a documentary filmmaker that a particular project would be visually interesting and would be a unique story. For example, a project that will convert an old warehouse into housing on the top levels, CED on the bottom; in the Tent City film 'Shelter from the Storm' the film maker Michael Connolly tells the story of squatters and why they wanted their own place, even if it was only a shack. He had to add a new ending. It now ends with the TC people in housing – real housing – their own housing.
- Learn French or have francophone spokespeople because Radio Canada does exceptional coverage of this issue. Why not turn to the ethnic press within your own community because this issue will interest them?

7. National events.

Use national events and their opportunities.

In 1999 when Mayor Mel Lastman brought people to Toronto from all across the country to hear from Anne Golden, who had authored his task force on homelessness, TDRC used that opportunity to have a community caucus. We booked space, in council chambers in fact, where the community agency people and homeless people could come together. We formed the National Housing and Homelessness Network (NHHN) that day and Mel paid the bill for that, inadvertently helping to create a strong national housing advocacy group! TDRC is now the national secretariat for the NHHN.

Each year, when the federal-provincial-territorial housing ministers meet, or the FPT meeting, as it is called, we join with our partners in the National Network, and depending on the location, for example, if it's London, then usually ourselves, FRAPRU, join in on the event. In Gatineau Quebec, last November FRAPRU members came from all over the province plus folks from London, Halifax and Edmonton. We always ask to be on the agenda and usually just get a delegation that meets with the 2 co-chairs, although Minister Fontana, last year ensured we had a full hearing. We always bring our supporters, our activists, people who may be homeless or under housed, or poor tenants.

We **always build a house at the FPT meeting.** Lately, it's been a straw-bale house – it's visual, it's symbolic, the people love doing it, the media love it.

We always issue a Report Card – on how the federal government is doing province by province and in the territories on their promises to fund and build housing. In fact, politicians have become very sensitive about our Report Card, often questioning their B-, C or D, hoping to get a higher grade I guess.

There are ways that you in your own community could be involved with us. Each month we have a national conference call where we update each other, develop strategies and actions. We still need more representation in particular from Alberta, from regions in BC, from Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and from northern Ontario.

We also celebrate National Housing Day - November 22 each year. That's the day that the Big City Mayors Caucus endorsed the TDRC's Disaster Declaration. You can build on what's happening in your own community or create an event for this year. Consider holding a march, a rally, a speak out, a press conference, a concert, a fundraising event for housing – but don't make it a research event. Call us and we'll help you with ideas.

Our table is in the main lobby. Please visit our table before you leave today. Take our contact information. Meet Sarah Ayers our staff and check out our web site. We have a list serve you can be part of and you will receive regular updates on the issues.

8. This conference is a national event!

At conferences like this it is possible to pass a significant resolution or make a statement. This is an historic time in our struggle, the word resistance got used the other day. We have wording today that was developed by several of the leading experts on housing and human rights and I propose that this body of people today consider endorsing this statement.

9. If you are to do research....

Please make it useful, make it alive, something that will not sit on a shelf or indulge curiosities that may be only that. Please don't consider this situation of homelessness and all the problems associated with it as simply an academic exercise or just an interesting research question. It is about people's lives and if you do have the time and money to do research ask yourselves some questions: how will the people affected by homelessness, ill health, discrimination and prejudice benefit? What policy reforms are likely to come from your work? Is it necessary? Is the issue really that complicated? Are you sure that the research will not provide the tools for coercive policies that are not positive public policies, for e.g. around street census, and coercion into treatment. How can you link with the broader academic community that looks at housing as the first and foremost means to respond to homelessness?

10. If you are to do policy work....

Please think about the word blueprint. How can you, your agency, your institution begin to think about the concept of a blueprint to end homelessness in your community? A blueprint that will include targets for housing and be based on values that mean solutions that respect human rights versus legislating people away with laws banning sleeping outside, or panhandling, or squeegeeing, or just opening emergency shelters in winter months, only to close them in May.

We need a national strategy to end homelessness.

To quote a young Jarvis student (my daughter) who a number of years ago wrote:

"We should not be shy when demanding to be part of the democratic process: it belongs to us as much 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

In closing let's remember the words of Linda McQuaig from our opening day. Linda provided us with a historical context to our situation today. She reminded us that most wins have come when there is a mass movement of people who voice their concern and participate in fighting for change.

Thank you

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