

Learning From Our Past, Fighting For Tomorrow

Presentation to the Lakehead Social Planning Council Cathy Crowe, May 31, 2006

This is my first visit to Thunder Bay so thank you for inviting me to speak at your AGM.

In my work as a Street Nurse, I'm usually overwhelmed trying to deal with the day-to-day emergencies in the homelessness disaster. If I have time left over, I like to spend it strategizing on what we need to do to turn things around, and bring us back to the days of a national housing program. So I will talk to you about both, today's reality and our continuing struggle.

When I am invited to a new community, I usually do some research before I go, so I would like to begin by saying a few words on what I found out about Thunder Bay. I learned quite a bit about your community.

My good friend and filmmaker Laura Sky filmed two of her documentaries here, *Crisis Call* and *Prescription For Addiction*. I learned through Laura about some of Thunder Bay's strong social justice networks. I also learned that Thunder Bay has produced some great musicians like Bobby Curtola and Paul Shaffer, and also some great hockey players, like Jack Adams, Alexander Auld and Eric Staal. As a nurse however, I was most intrigued to find out about the great nurses that came from your community and the history those nurses helped shape.

For example – with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Mother Monica and several nursing sisters from the Order of the Sisters of Saint Joseph came to Port Arthur in 1881. They worked tirelessly to nurse the many casualties among the population of railway workers. Their clinic/convent eventually

provided the momentum for St. Joseph 's General Hospital. I know the Sisters would have been useful in dealing with the economic casualties of unemployment and poverty that resulted from the decline in your transportation and forestry industries.

There is a lot we can learn from the nurses of Thunder Bay 's past. Like when 80 immigrants were quarantined for smallpox in 1893, in a camp just outside of town. The Victorian Order of Nurses responded, developing a Cottage Hospital by 1901. These same nurses would have some strategies today on quarantine and safe 'camp or shelter' conditions, should Thunder Bay ever come to experience the pandemic. They sure would have taught me a thing or two as I helped set up the infrastructure for the Tent City in downtown Toronto which, at its peak, was a community of 120 homeless people in over 50 shacks with woodstoves, one source of running water and 6 portable toilets. Tent City turned out to be the largest act of civil disobedience by homeless people since the Great Depression.

Canadian nurses serving overseas in WW 1 earned the right to the rank of officer. But local nurse, Miss Elizabeth Smellie from Port Arthur, who was Matron-in-chief of the Army Nursing Service, was the first woman and the first nurse to ever be made a Colonel. She was also a key builder of the Victoria Order of Nurses.

As both a Colonel and as a nurse, I can't help but wonder what Ms. Smellie might think of Canada's annual defense spending – which was \$15.5 billion for 2005, and growing rapidly under the Conservatives, versus the drastic cuts we all saw to spending on social housing. As a nurse, I think she would be shocked to see the extent of homelessness in our towns and cities, the epidemic of hunger, the disparity between First Nations people and the rest of the population, the low minimum wages, and the seemingly willful and intentional neglect by our senior levels of government.

Today's reality

Sometimes we hear that 'the poor will always be with us', that there will always be people with special needs, and yes, to a certain extent there will always be

vulnerable populations in western culture. But what is distinctly different today, than from the days of Nurse Smellie and the nursing sisters, is the purposeful and intentional collection of forces, policies and practices that have created this vulnerability.

Globalization, the dismantling of social safety nets, the privatization of public services, and the dramatic changes that man-made and also natural disasters are having on our communities is creating havoc in mass numbers, especially with such depleted social programs and infrastructure.

I remember very clearly how soon I saw men in a homeless shelter after the Toronto Inglis plant closed following the Free Trade agreement. Within mere weeks of Mike Harris canceling 17,000 units of affordable housing and imposing the 21.6% welfare cuts, we saw the number of people who were forced to use drop-in centres for food and rely on emergency shelters, more than double. We all saw people who had faced job loss, economic evictions and welfare cuts who suddenly found themselves homeless, never believing they could end up there.

Ontario communities, and I'm sure that includes Thunder Bay , witnessed a number of practices that created or worsened this inequity and the social chaos. There was:

- Amalgamation
- Downloading of services such as social housing and other programs
- Hospital closures and mergers
- Welfare rate cuts and the introduction of workfare
- Tighter eligibility criteria for ODSP – in fact there existed an unspoken practice by ODSP of what seemed to be an automatic first application denial, in addition to tighter ID criteria since September 11
- Cancellation of the federal and also Ontario 's affordable housing programs
- Delisting of services, such as eye exams
- The restructuring and rationing of services. In Toronto, street outreach services can no longer give survival supplies such as food or sleeping bags to homeless people sleeping outside.
- Subtle but intentional redefining of services, with increasing reliance

on policing and security firms to deal with social issues. For example, Laura Sky's movie *Crisis Call* shows clearly the result of the lack of supportive housing for people with mental health issues

- Introduction of OHIP premiums, a regressive surtax on middle income earners
- And of course...corporate tax cuts!

This is the context for where we are today on a number of social fronts.

The making of a disaster

The World Health Organization describes a disaster as

“any occurrence that causes damage, ecological disruption, loss of human life, deterioration of health and health services on a scale sufficient to warrant an extraordinary response from outside the affected community.”

I had the particular vantage point of being a Street Nurse working at what can only be described as the ***epicentre of homelessness in Canada***, at the corner of Sherbourne and Dundas in downtown east Toronto. It was from that vantage point that I began seeing things I couldn't at first explain, and things I couldn't easily treat or prevent. There was a seemingly endless stream of new people entering the shelter system, people who remained homeless year after year, and an array of illness and infection that people suffered through while living in a shelter or worse - outside. I was stunned! I saw people with pretty severe infections like pneumonia or recovering from surgery in a shelter, people on medication for tuberculosis, and meanwhile more and more people deciding to sleep outside rather than enter crowded and unhealthy shelters. I remember one day sitting in the All Saints Church drop-in thinking – I've gone to more funerals and memorial services in this job than anywhere else and I'm a community health nurse, not a palliative care nurse.

In 1995-96 things grew exponentially worse – a direct result of the 1993 cancellation by the federal government of the national housing program and the 1995 cancellation of Ontario's program. As conditions got worse we saw clusters of deaths, the return of tuberculosis, malnutrition, mass outdoor

sleeping, and the horrible effects of crowding in shelters.

I joined with several colleagues to form the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. In the summer of 1998 we wrote a report called the State of Emergency Declaration, which used statistics and referenced the UN Charters that Canada had signed. It was a passionate document, at a very basic literacy level and it was to the point.

Then, in October 1998 we held a press conference and declared homelessness a **National Disaster**. What we saw was not unique to Toronto. We believed that Toronto was the canary in the mineshaft of homelessness in Canada.

We released 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 rapidly growing homeless populations. This effort is not unlike what happened in the United States in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Second, we called for a long-term solution, the 1% solution – a National Housing Program where all levels of government would spend an additional 1% of their budgets to build affordable housing. The One Per Cent 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.

The first item we called for – the federal emergency relief monies essentially occurred. Homelessness in Canada was catapulted on the national and international scene. Shamed by UN condemnations of Canada's record, Prime Minister Chrétien appointed Claudette Bradshaw as our first ever **Minister Responsible for Homelessness** and 'SCPI' (Supporting Community Partnerships Initiatives) monies were rolled out across the country - hundreds of millions of dollars! So, Canada had the distinction of having a Minister Responsible for Homelessness but not a Minister with full responsibility for housing! The hundreds of millions of SCPI dollars were, in effect, disaster relief

monies.

Regarding the second demand – the 1% solution – more recently former Minister Fontana brought us closer to this objective with national consultations and a proposed new Canada Housing Framework agreement but surprise, surprise, the successive Liberal budgets had zero dollars for housing. The Layton-Martin budget deal that led to Bill C-48 included \$1.6 billion for housing over two years, but then the Liberal government was defeated in the last federal election.

Today, as you may know, \$1.4 billion for housing was included in the recent Harper Conservative budget, to flow over three years instead of two. No strings attached but also seemingly little criteria or accountability. Trust funds will hold the money, leaving provinces to determine the mechanisms to roll the monies out.

There are many unanswered questions:

- Will it be topped up in Ontario with matching funds or any funds?
- Will it be earmarked for co-op housing?
- Social housing?
- Rent supplements or housing allowances?
- Private home ownership schemes?
- Will we see any social housing units created by the spring of 2007?

In addition the Ontario government added no new money in its recent budget and its track record in rolling out earlier monies from the Affordable Housing Program is abysmal.

Fighting For Tomorrow

It does seem that funding wins or policy wins only occur when there is a momentum of public protest, media scrutiny or public and legal inquiry through court and inquest proceedings – which many of us have become quite experienced at.

For example, there were a series of events that forced us to react to the crisis. These crisis included inadequate drop-in centre funding, a cluster of

homeless freezing deaths, a community inquiry into policing practices towards the homeless, and a community inquiry into conditions at Seaton House (the largest emergency shelter in Canada). Each struggle had in common the following: a sophisticated street level knowledge, the formation of coalitions/committees and advocacy groups, the inclusion of both homeless/underhoused people with strategic allies such as professors and lawyers, the involvement and creative use of the media and both traditional and non-traditional tactics to shift public policy at City/Metro Hall.

These wins can be measured by dollars and outcomes. This is some of what we achieved:

- the establishment of the City of Toronto Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons – to advise City Council
- \$600,000 new emergency funding for drop-in centres
- an Inquest into freezing deaths and a huge public outcry when the presiding coroner wouldn't allow evidence on the housing crisis
- reduced harassment of homeless people by police – at least for a while
- more humane policies at Seaton House, including funding for renovations
- many new shelters opened including federal armouries during the winter months
- Public health research into the prevalence of tuberculosis in the homeless population, which showed a 38% latent TB infection rate

We made some significant wins, and it is important to celebrate them. But we can't lose sight of the fact that we will need many more wins if we are to bring about a national housing program.

Strategies

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to challenge what is a national emergency and an enormous human rights scandal. I have three ideas for strategy that I want to propose to you.

1. Use the recent United Nations report

Last week, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights criticized Canada again, and rightly so. The UN watchdog group scolded Canada for its failure to live up to its commitment under the international treaty that protects people's economic, social and cultural rights. The Committee grilled Canadian government reps for two days, questioning its record on poverty, homelessness, indigenous and immigrant rights, health and education. It found the situation in Canada wanting in all areas and in some cases worse than when they last examined the country's record. The UN Committee uses the term ***national emergency*** to describe Canada's homeless situation.

Your situation in Thunder Bay, like the rest of the country, is highlighted by discriminatory government policies, which infringe upon the economic, social and cultural rights of homeless people, First Nations people, women and disabled people.

You may wish to consider holding your own inquiry, and produce local evidence to that effect. Involve your community leaders as panelists, engage members of the media, and prepare a report that that will bring the UN findings home.

2. Pandemic Flu

Do you know that the impact predictions in Thunder Bay's pandemic plan are: 70-160 deaths, 290-680 hospitalized, and the total affected and sick 24,000-55,000? I did not see any mention of the words shelter, homeless, housing or poverty in the Thunder Bay plan.

It is critical that you heighten the urgency for local prevention and public health reforms, to protect people living in poverty and other compromising situations such as shelters or correctional facilities from a pandemic.

Toronto's blackout taught us that low-income people including seniors and people with disabilities couldn't afford even a simple loss of electricity, let alone plan to stockpile for a pandemic.

I will not spend more time on that, but my March newsletter on the TDRC website goes into more detail.

3. *Join forces with us in the National Housing and Homelessness Network to add a strong northern voice.*

I probably don't need to tell you why it would be helpful for us to have a voice from the north on our monthly NHHN calls. It is free and your agency could be the disseminator of information and action strategies to your wider community.

November 22 is National Housing Day; marking the day the Big City Mayors Caucus of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities declared homelessness a national disaster. Events are happening across the country on National Housing Day - try and plan something here.

These are a few of my ideas; I hope you will come up with some of your own.

From then to now

The early nurses that made history in Thunder Bay worked in severe conditions. In the years that followed we have seen tremendous campaigns that introduced employment insurance, pensions, employment standards, minimum wage, Medicare and a national housing program.

Our national housing program was taken away from us in 1993, and we will need to fight if we want to get it back!

Check with delivery
