

S.O.S.
In Canada! - People Are Dying for a Home -
Cathy Crowe – Regina
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“Can anyone help?”

A Toronto media outlet recently asked me what I thought of a new hospital mobile outreach program that would bring health care to homeless people. I replied, ‘Well as long as we have homelessness, we will have two-tiered health care. As long as we have mobile vans, health workers with knapsacks providing curbside care we should face the fact that we really have two-tiered health care in this country.’

In 1909, J.S. Woodsworth, the first leader of the CCF wrote a letter to the Manitoba Free Press about a ‘little foreign girl (*sic*)’ that he had seen living in filth in a North Winnipeg tenement. His letter asked if anyone could help her. This little girl was living in deplorable conditions with her family, sharing one bed, which doubled as table and chairs, and she was languishing with horrible open sores on her body.

In subsequent decades, Canadians participated in social justice campaigns that led to the birth of many of our national social programs including ***Medicare***. The development of our social programs has always been based on the belief that Canadians should not have to rely on luck or the benevolence of others for life’s very basics, like food, water, shelter and health care. Most Canadians know about the Medicare story - how it was achieved and, today’s story – how it is under threat.

One of our great social justice campaigns birthed our national housing program, yet most Canadians don’t know the story of how it came to be. It is a riveting story, a story just waiting for a film to be made about it.

Returning World War II veterans facing a housing shortage, fought for their right to housing across Canada. In Ottawa, Montreal and Vancouver, women’s groups joined in. They demonstrated, and they actually took over empty buildings like the Hotel Vancouver and the Kildare barracks in Ottawa.

The campaign 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, which came to be our national housing program. CMHC helped to build affordable housing for close to 2 million Canadians until that program was quietly destroyed.

Our housing program was taken from us in 1993 and we have to get it back, because people are dying for a home, literally.

Canada remains one of the few countries in the world without a national housing program. Canadian NGO's pointed this out in their 2005 submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Working Group. Canada has:

“no coherent policy of national standards to ensure that the right to adequate housing is enjoyed by all and particularly by poor and disadvantaged groups, such as low-income women.”

The 2007 federal budget was entirely silent on homelessness. The hundreds of pages of budget documents barely even mention housing, except to repeat some previously announced spending. Perhaps more frightening is that no one seems to have noticed – there were no headlines in the papers saying ***“Harper ignores 4 million Canadians in core housing need!”*** or ***“300,000 homeless people left with no hope for housing!”***

What this means, with no national housing program and no political will to recreate one, is that the following hotspots will continue to erupt unchecked throughout Canada.

1. Shelter conditions

Each year over 300,000 men, women and children are homeless and are forced to live, sometimes months but more often years, in crowded and inadequately funded emergency shelters. Across this country, bunk beds, dormitory rooms, tuberculosis outbreaks, bedbug infestations, noise, violence, and mental trauma are all too common in our shelter system.

2. Outside sleeping/squats/tent cities

An overflow of perhaps several thousand people are forced to sleep outside, in squats, tent cities or sporadically in hotel rooms or church basements facing the additional risk of the elements, violence and isolation. To make matters worse this visible group, often labeled as street people, face new and harsh municipal and provincial laws on where they can sleep and how they must behave. More hate crimes against homeless people are being reported, which seems to parallel these new punitive laws.

3. Charity

My mother was a nurse, so I know about the days before Medicare. I know that we could not rely on donations, volunteers or the private sector to provide life-saving services to Canadians needing health care. I also know that we cannot rely on donations, volunteers or the private sector to provide Canadians with housing or emergency shelter. Most major cities in this country rely on huge charitable endeavours to provide life saving services for our people. The most obvious, the Out of the Cold or In(n) from the Cold faith based programs that provide single night shelter on the floor of their place of worship. That little girl in the North Winnipeg tenement is now a little girl or boy staying with her parents on a church basement floor in Calgary, being bused to school, only to be bused after school to a different church basement floor and so on and so on.

4. Pan flu and emerging viruses

Social disasters like overcrowding, hunger and homelessness are usually paired with plagues, scourges and emerging viruses. We have already witnessed clusters of tuberculosis and TB deaths amongst the homeless population, we have seen lockdowns in Canadian shelters during a Norwalk virus outbreak, and during SARS we saw an attempt to 'home quarantine' the homeless.

Those relying on day and night shelters or food banks might wonder how our stretched infrastructure will hold up should another SARS like event occur, or how their health unit's Pandemic Plan is relevant when there already exists a shortage of soap, toilet paper and paper towel in the daytime drop-in that serves 300 people.

5. Heat/global warming

Heat deaths are one more consequence of homelessness, poverty and social isolation and the withdrawal of social programs. Temperatures in Toronto rooming houses last summer were recorded at 34-35 degrees Celsius.

6. Deaths

Anecdotal reports suggest that homeless deaths are rising all across the country. They are disproportionately young and aboriginal compared to the Canadian housed population. These deaths are widely ignored and under reported. Coroners routinely dismiss a homeless person's death as due to 'natural causes', seemingly unaware that a pattern of social neglect is taking place.

For those ill and dying who are fortunate enough to live in Toronto or Ottawa, there are shelters with palliative care components and hospice – but still no housing.

Some front line workers are beginning to face the realization that their current work includes a palliative component, despite the lack of a terminal medical diagnosis in the people they care for.

A national program

Given these horrific circumstances and outcomes that I have only touched on, I want to send out an S.O.S, and say that the fight we face now, is like the fight for Medicare. ***The fight for housing must be included in our continuing fight for basic health care in Canada.***