

Alberta Housing Coalition Conference

**Canada's homeless disaster includes
Alberta**

Edmonton, Alberta
Milner Library Theatre
November 15, 2004

Cathy Crowe, Street Nurse,
Atkinson Economic Justice Fellow

Canada's homeless disaster includes Alberta.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you tonight. My talk is titled "***Canada's homeless disaster includes Alberta***" because when I thought about coming here I realized that, with the exception of Ontario, Alberta's state of homelessness and its housing deficit is portrayed as a significant crisis and dominates national media coverage of the issue. Homelessness in Alberta is often depicted as having some unique features – people who are working and living in homeless shelters, a high proportion of first nations people and extremely difficult weather conditions. Then there are the late night visits by your Premier to a homeless shelter.

I'm going to talk to you about homelessness, how it connects to health and why a National Housing Program is, in my opinion, as important a national program to fight for, as Medicare.

I want to begin by telling you that there is a nursing specialty in this country called ***street nursing*** – that's what I am, a ***street nurse***, and that speaks volumes to our country's need for a national housing program. The term itself was coined by a homeless man in downtown Toronto who yelled a friendly greeting at us one day from across the street – "Hey street nurse!" There are now over 100 street nurses across the country – from British Columbia to the Maritimes. Our patients are homeless, and to be very blunt, we cannot do much about their health problems when at times we cannot even find them an emergency shelter bed. You reach a limit, and as I once remarked, I am not a carpenter.

I have worked in this area for over 15 years, doing my nursing in drop-in centres, in shelters, on the street, sometimes in social housing buildings, and in the most unlikely places like the Home Depot owned land on Toronto's waterfront that became known as Tent City.

When I first started this chapter in my nursing career I was surprised to see men and women of all ages, all backgrounds – not the stereotypical image of the older homeless man that I had held. As well, I was surprised to learn and see that they had just about every health problem you or I could have – not just foot problems as I had expected. They were, obviously facing some unique challenges because they did not have a roof over their head, their own bedroom, their own medicine cabinet, family to care for them – all of the many things we take for granted.

Street Nursing has been a life lesson for me, in economics, politics and human rights.

I remember one of my first lessons. I had heard about a plant closure in Toronto, the Inglis plant back in the 80s. Several months later I was shocked to see some of the laid off workers in the men's shelter – homeless. I was so taken aback that I realized, to understand my work better, I needed to monitor the Business pages of the newspaper and also look at how policies like Free Trade were impacting our economy and on peoples' lives.

I used to think about human rights as they might be relevant to starving children, or questions of discrimination such as racism, or families fleeing military dictatorship or war or torture. As a Street Nurse, the question of human rights came a lot closer to home.

I remember the first time when I could not find a shelter bed for a woman at night and could only give her a bus ticket so she could get to her favourite subway grate.

I remember Eddie Fay, who I sent to the Emergency Department. He was discharged at 2 in the morning and was found dead hours later in front of a synagogue in Kensington market.

So, you probably get the picture I was witnessing what most people rarely heard about.

Things were bad, and then all hell broke loose.

- In 1993 the federal government cancelled its national housing programme. To be honest, at the time I wasn't following national politics enough to even understand what this would mean.
- In 1995 Ontario's Conservative government did the same thing, they cancelled 17,000 units under development. They also cut welfare rates 21.6 % and made significant changes to the landlord tenant act. Other provinces started to mirror these cost cutting practices.
- And in 1996, the federal government transferred most of its existing housing programs to the provinces and territories. This meant that our federal government, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, no longer helped Canadians find or maintain housing.
- In Alberta, major cuts in provincial housing programs were made, including canceling the seniors' supportive housing program. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation reported in 2001 that Alberta made the biggest cuts, in financial terms, on housing programs among all the provinces and territories since the 1990s.

So, to summarize, when our governments suddenly and decisively cut spending and downloaded programs, they left low and moderate-income Canadians stranded. Prof. Jean Wolfe, of McGill University, one of the leading experts on Canadian housing policy, had this to say:

“It is only in Canada that the national government has, except for CMHC loans, withdrawn from social housing. The rush to get out of managing existing projects and building new, low-income housing has taken advocates by surprise. It was never imagined that a system that had taken 50 years to build-up could be dismantled so rapidly. Social housing policy in Canada now consists of a checkerboard of 12 provincial and territorial policies, and innumerable local policies. It is truly post-modern.”

- Prof. Jean Wolfe, McGill University

The Avalanche

Within months, of the 1995 housing and welfare cuts we saw homelessness essentially double on the streets and in drop-ins. We were overwhelmed. We saw clusters of homeless deaths. We saw the return of tuberculosis, more deaths, malnutrition, and more visible homelessness on the streets in most major Canadian cities, and then also in towns!

I can't really begin to portray the trauma, the damage, the suffering that myself and co-workers saw. We were traumatized too, although I don't think we knew it at the time. We were constantly sharing stories, strategizing and trying to move forward to survive.

Naming the disaster

In desperation, in 1998 a few of us formed the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee. **We believed** that homelessness was a disaster.

The World Health Organization describes 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.” For me, the WHO was describing Canada’s and for sure Toronto’s homeless situation.

We issued a declaration declaring homelessness a National Disaster and if you check out www.tdrc.net, the rest is history.

The State of Emergency Declaration October, 1998, Toronto

We call on all levels of government to declare homelessness a national disaster requiring emergency humanitarian relief.

We urge that they immediately develop and implement a National Homelessness Relief and Prevention Strategy using disaster relief funds both to provide the homeless with immediate health protection and housing and to prevent further homelessness. Canada has signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights guaranteeing everyone’s right to “an adequate standard of living ... including adequate food, clothing and housing.”

Homeless people have no decent standard of living; our governments are violating these Human Rights. Despite Canada’s reputation for providing relief to people made temporarily homeless by natural disasters, our governments are unwilling to help the scores of thousands of people in

Canada condemned to homelessness. Morally, economically, socially, and legally, we cannot allow homelessness to become "normal" in Canadian life. Inaction betrays many thousands of us to a miserable existence and harms our society for years to come.

Homelessness is now widely considered a national disaster in Canada.

We quickly witnessed widespread "buy-in" to our declaration by national groups, Ottawa, Vancouver, Victoria and Toronto city councils, and community groups, that this homeless crisis was a disaster. The United Nations similarly agreed and responded with statements that reflected a polite condemnation of the Canadian government policies that allowed the situation to occur.

As one 2000 article noted: ***"Tonight, more homeless people per capita will sleep on the streets and in shelters of Toronto than in several major US cities. In fact, statistics show that homelessness in Canada's largest urban centre is comparable to levels in New York City, long considered the homeless capital of North America."***

- Canadian Press, 2000

That was then, this is now.

Over the last couple of years, I started looking at this issue outside of Toronto.

In each community I visit, I hear the same thing. Food bank shelves are empty. There are not enough emergency shelter beds for women, and couples. More people are sleeping outside. I hear about long waits for affordable housing, ranging from 8-12 years. I hear that in each

community a far too high percentage of homeless are First Nations people – especially in Sudbury. In each community homeless people are dying. The Ottawa situation was extremely serious – 17 deaths in the first half of the year. In Sudbury, I saw a community still grieving over the death of Kimberly Rogers, who died under house arrest, 8 months pregnant.

We now have a number of circumstances and seasonal responses to homelessness that we should examine.

1. Cities everywhere, are now developing ‘community plans’ to deal with homelessness and they are happily spending what little federal and provincial homelessness monies they can get their hands on. But they are merely patching up the crisis.
2. Street vans roam through city streets searching for homeless people, providing food and curbside health care.
3. Sleeping bag drives are no longer just a Toronto phenomenon.
4. Lots of people care and lots of people are donating time and money. Churches routinely open their basements for one night per week, in the winter, great food is served and mats are laid down for people to sleep on. In the morning homeless people leave and move from agency to agency. In the spring, the churches are “tired” and close their doors.
5. Politicians and researchers have actually described homeless people as migratory, as if they were hunters and gatherers, and they use that as an excuse to not open proper shelters where a person could stay 7/7.
6. Predictably, every Thanksgiving and Christmas we see on

television the turkey dinner and grateful shots of grateful homeless people sitting quietly at tables eating.

Charity obviously does not end homelessness. The private sector has obviously not kicked in and built affordable, social housing in the last few years. Perhaps one of the most well known projects, Habitat for Humanity may be able to build 5 or 10 family homes in your community, but these homes will not fix the homeless problem.

Please remember, we once had a national housing program – it began just shortly after World War II! In 1973, which was the start of what many housing advocates now call the “golden age of housing in Canada”, the federal government introduced amendments to the National Housing Act with these thrilling words: “Good housing at a reasonable cost is a social right of every citizen of this country. . . This must be our objective, our obligation and our goal.” And the government of the day backed up those brave words with real action: Over the next 20 years, close to half a million units of good quality, affordable housing were built throughout Canada. In fact, I live in a federally-funded housing co-op in downtown Toronto. So, we do have, or at least we had a proud history of successful housing programs, that provided good homes in great communities to a great many Canadians.

We are now one of the only countries in the world without a central government investment in building affordable housing. We need to change that.

The tale of Tent City – smashing the stereotypes

I want to end by telling you about an event that I believe will

go down in history. It is an example of how we work to keep housing on our national agenda.

We are starting to see self-managed refugee/squatter camps developing in Canada.

Homeless people striving for a healthier existence outside of the shelter system initiated a Tent City. Tent City was a squatter's camp on Toronto's waterfront, perhaps on one of the most expensive pieces of property in the country. It grew and grew until it was 140 people. Tent City turned out to be the largest and longest act of civil disobedience by homeless people since the 1930s depression. Many of the men and women living there were labourers, drywallers, steelworkers, roofers, or outreach workers. There were couples and there were disabled people.

Early on a dozen people asked for our aid. We brought in disaster relief including portable toilets, insulation, wood stoves for heat and cooking, showers and shower bags. We actually brought in disaster housing, made in Canada housing, that is used in other countries that have experienced a natural disaster such as an earthquake. We also began to experiment, and we brought in a house with a composting toilet and shower. By then, people were no longer in tents – they were in self-built shacks, some built to building code, or they were in a trailer or the pre-fab homes that we brought in on flatbed trucks.

This was a vibrant, or should I say, lively community. Then, after 3 years they were evicted....and that's a long story so I'm going to skip it (note- the movie Shelter from the Storm tells this story). However **protest**, public support, media attention and strong, strong advocacy led to the Tent City people winning a rent supplement program, and people were

finally put into housing. As of this week, two years later, 100 men and women are housed in apartments. For communities with a high vacancy rate, rent supplements are an immediate way to house people. You can imagine what that does to someone's life and health, it's not rocket science. These folks are somewhat healthier, they are happier, and they are engaged – with friends, family, school, work, community activities, etc.

A special formula created this victory:

- homeless people that were always prepared to be interviewed by the media to give a face to the issue, and to give a profile on an international scale to this national crisis,
- activists that were prepared to do some crazy things,
- academics and professionals and business people that believed in the idea and gave credibility to our efforts
- architects that dared to experiment with us,
- unions and churches that twinned with this project and gave us money
- a film maker that made a documentary on the whole process (which by the way we sell for a minimal cost)
- a city hall official who was prepared to use his negotiating skills to leverage money from a senior level of government to create a pilot program to house the people

But the point of it all was of course to show that people deserved housing, they had a right to housing, and once housed, they would not be going back to a squatter's camp.

I want to end by reading you a poem that Dri reads in the movie Street Nurse.

Home is where you have your parents,
Home is where you do belong,
Home is where you got your talents,
Home, your shelter from the throng,
Where your mother taught you love,
Gave first thoughts into your thinking,
Where from heaven high above,
You have seen the stars blinking,
Where your father is your guide,
Always present when you need him
And the life is gay and bright as
Your home you love to live in,
But just as everywhere things,
When old will have to go,
And so your home will once not be there
But in memory it will glow.

So, a happy ending to this story, but the battle goes on across the country, we are still fighting to have housing even discussed at our national political level.

Thank you for being here and continuing the fight. I look forward to spending more time with you over the next few days.

Check with delivery