

Homelessness Symposium

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Sarnia

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Visiting Sarnia-Lambton

First let me thank you for inviting me to Sarnia-Lambton. It's my first visit, and although I was surprised to be invited to the Symposium, I wasn't surprised that there is homelessness and concerns about adequate affordable housing here in Sarnia-Lambton.

Let me begin with a disclaimer. I knew essentially nothing about Sarnia or the region. This is the primary reason I'm here – so that I can learn more about your community's situation vis-à-vis housing and homelessness.

But I did a little bit of research about you. First of all, I thought, what an interesting word 'Sarnia', so I thought I'd check out its origins because maybe it was a First Nations word that meant something beautiful like 'home', but I learned that it's the Latin name for a place called Guernsey in the Channel Islands. So maybe Sarnia was called Sarnia because early settlers were homesick? I still wonder what the origins of Lambton are?

I learned you have a lot of fun here. You were the kissing capital of the world until 2003 when Manila in the Philippines surpassed your record!

You are probably most famous for the interviews, outside the Taco Bell, in the Michael Moore documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, and what a great job your Mayor Bradley did, inviting Moore to become an honorary citizen.

Well, I'm sure I'll know quite a bit more about Sarnia before I leave – or at least I better.

Let me begin by telling you a bit about where I come from.

I grew up in small town Ontario, in Cobourg and later in Kingston. Growing up, I certainly never imagined I would become a street nurse, let alone that there would be such an explosion of homelessness across the country that it would be declared a national disaster.

I moved to Toronto for nursing school and ended up staying there. I worked as a nurse in various downtown communities in various capacities. For the last 17 years I've been a 'street nurse'. I have really been what you would call a community health nurse or a nurse practitioner but the term 'street nurse' was coined by a homeless man to describe who we nurses were to him - nurses working in a specialty nursing outreach program for people who were homeless. We saw the term as an extraordinary compliment and the term stuck. Where there were once about 5 of us in the country, sadly, there are now well over 100.

The term Street Nurse actually means that – ***there is now a nursing specialty in this country called homeless health care, and that is obscene, it is wrong, and it is cause for national shame.***

I've been a Street Nurse for 17 years – and I'll tell you a bit about what that has meant to me, but first let me tell you what I'm doing now and why.

Last year I received the Atkinson Economic Justice Award from the Atkinson Foundation, which means that I can devote more time to the issues that I feel are crucial to the life and health of people facing this housing crisis. The heart of my work means connecting with Canadians from all walks of life to remind them that housing is as important to the health of this country as Medicare. I am currently based at the Sherbourne Health Centre in downtown Toronto and I coordinate the work of the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, which as you may know is the group that declared homelessness a national disaster in 1998.

I work on a variety of fronts: from Hotspots and Hate to Housing and Hope

So, in practical terms there are four key areas.

1. The conditions that literally mean life or death if you are homeless. I do this mostly in Toronto but the issues are relevant across the country. This is what I call the **hotspots**. For example:
 - the threat of infectious diseases both new and old, such as tuberculosis, Norwalk virus, SARS, flu including the Pandemic Flu; and other outbreaks

- like Legionnaire's Disease;
- new and old pests and infestations such as lice, scabies and bedbugs;
- crowded and intolerable emergency shelter conditions that lead to the above. You might be surprised to know that some of our shelters do not meet the UN Standard for Refugee Camps;
- high incidence of chronic disease such as heart disease and more recently chronic health problems such as malnutrition and hunger;
- high incidence of trauma, whether it be from accidents or violence, heat or cold;
- the emerging need for palliative care;
- the extraordinarily high death rate;
- the immediate and long term impact of homelessness on mental health;

2. The stereotypes and their impact. This is what leads to **hate**. You know like:

- "people choose to sleep outside"
- "he could get a job"
- "they're all just wino's"
- "it's just a big city problem"
- "they're all mentally ill"
- And, there's the new anti-panhandling legislation and other laws criminalizing homelessness, eg. The Safe Streets Act, Toronto's new by-law banning sleeping at City Hall and former civic centres.

3. The nation-wide crisis. The crisis in **housing**.

I have been looking at the extent of the homeless crisis across the country and the great need in many communities for social housing. This means visiting select communities and examining their problems and solutions. I have recently been appointed to Minister Fontana's Advisory Committee on the new housing framework and I look forward to seeing it implemented.

4. Building the movement for a national housing program. This is really about building capacity and getting more **help** for the movement.

This year I am particularly focusing on working to engage the labour movement, health care workers and the community of cultural entertainers – musicians, etc. to see if they will take on this issue as one that is important to them. Only then, when we can build a larger popular movement or a bigger voice of concern over

the crisis, will we see political action.

One of the reasons I was away the last 4 weeks was to work on a book that is really an oral history of people I spent time interviewing. They are people I have been close to, who were homeless, and extremely active in the fight for housing. I hope this book will reach a large audience and introduce the reader to people who I consider homeless activists – people that have been involved in fighting homelessness and who have been homeless. Hopefully these voices will put a human face to this tragedy.

A History Lesson

I'd like to talk to you about the making of what we call the homeless disaster. It's an important Canadian history lesson that we should all know and learn from – primarily so that we can never let it happen again.

Canadians, beginning with Tommy Douglas, fought hard to achieve Medicare and although it may not be perfect, for example, it is yet to include a Home Care and Pharmacare component; at least we have a program that we can build on. Canadians care for Medicare and we will fight to keep Medicare. Housing is a different story.

When a housing shortage became evident at the end of World War II in Canada and our veterans returned home, there was a significant outcry that our governments needed to meet people's social needs. In the period from the late 1940s to the end of the 1960s the federal government funded about 12,000 units of largely public housing. When I visit a new community, I'll be touring an area and suddenly I'll see it and I'll say "is that your war-time housing?" It's still standing, it's still usable and it is probably one of the most important reminders we have that, at one point in our history, our government knew they had to respond and produce what its citizens demanded. I bet you know where your wartime housing is here in Sarnia. I visited it yesterday to take a picture. It's in terrific shape with new siding and I urge you to highlight it when you talk about what was built in your community when you had federal investment in housing.

Starting in the 60s and quickly ramping up with amendments to the National Housing Act in 1973, the federal government funded more than 500,000 social housing units in co-ops and non-profits. We averaged about 20,000 units per year, and we built it all across the country. During those years we developed an incredible experience building housing. Churches built non-profit housing, co-ops built non-profit housing, cities had housing programs, unions developed housing. Sure, we made some mistakes with huge high-rise projects that didn't have enough green space or services, but overall our co-op housing, our supportive housing, our not-for-profits have done a remarkable job.

But then, starting in 1984 and over the next decade, the federal government cut almost \$2 billion from housing programs. The cuts continued until 1993 – then the Mulroney government cancelled all new affordable housing spending in 1994.

In 1996, the federal government (Paul Martin was Finance Minister) began downloading of existing federal housing programs to the provinces and territories. In 1998 they made the decision to commercialize Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), Canada's housing agency, and limit their role in new housing

These steps left Canada as one of the only countries in the world without a national housing program.

We have lost the opportunity to build at least 300,000 social housing units, based on the average number of units, 25,000 units/year that were funded prior to the Mulroney cuts.

In 1998, the federal government changed the National Housing Act, eroding the role of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation in developing new affordable housing and turning it into a "profit centre" by increasing mortgage insurance fees and cutting programs.

Only in Canada

Prof. Jean Wolfe of McGill University wrote:

“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 has taken 50 years to build-up could be dismantled so rapidly. Social housing in Canada now consists of a checkerboard of 12 provincial and territorial policies, and innumerable local policies. It is truly post-modern.”

These federal actions were followed by similar reductions, cancellation and downloading by most provinces and territories.

Here in Ontario

Here in Ontario in 1995, the Mike Harris government cancelled 17,000 social housing units that had already been approved for development. Those units could have housed 40,000 people.

Here in Ontario in 1995, the same government cut by almost one-quarter, the shelter-allowance component for welfare recipients.

Here in Ontario in 1998, housing was downloaded to municipalities.

Here in Ontario in the 1990s there were major cuts to provincial housing programs. There were similar patterns across the country.

So, we should not have been surprised when we saw the following, and as a nurse, in Toronto, I had a particular vantage point.

- New and scared faces in drop-in centres and shelters. People who had never thought they would be homeless. A rise in economic evictions.
- Roads out and roads in. When things got tight and stressful in other communities for people who needed additional social services, the road usually led out of the small town and into the big city where there were more resources.
- Crowded shelters, almost impossible to find a shelter bed.
- Increased violence and theft in the shelters.

- New and old diseases - tuberculosis outbreaks, tuberculosis deaths. Lice, scabies, bedbug infestations. Norwalk virus outbreaks. Malnutrition.
- More visible 'street homelessness' and encampments like squats and tent cities.
- Worsening overall health, including mental health.
- Escalating death rate.

Homelessness is a National Disaster

Disasters are not limited to earthquakes, ice storms or floods. When significant numbers are affected (1.7 million Canadians suffering an affordability crisis alone and an estimated 250,000 using emergency shelters in a year), when people remain in shelters for more than a few months – when the expectation becomes years, when old diseases like tuberculosis come back to haunt, when bedbug infestations become a public health hazard, and when you are 4x more likely to die if you are homeless, then it's time to call things for what they are.

In 1998 we formed the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and we declared homelessness a national disaster – national. 400 organizations from across the country endorsed our declaration. City councils across the country including Toronto, Ottawa, and Vancouver passed motions to this effect. The Big City Mayors Caucus of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities did the same. That day, November 22 is now marked as National Housing Day across the country.

Homelessness is no longer invisible nor can it be ignored, although the powers that be have been procrastinating as long as they can, avoiding the obvious solution.

Since declaring Homelessness a National Disaster there have been victories:

- In 1999 Prime Minister Chrétien appointed a Minister Responsible for Homelessness – the first time in Canada, maybe a first for the world, which says a lot about our problem. Fortunately, now we have in name at least, a Minister of Housing, Minister Joe Fontana and not a Minister Responsible for Homelessness.
- Two strong national networks have been formed: the National Housing

and Homelessness Network and the National Coalition on Housing and Homelessness.

- MacLean's reported that 85% of Canadians agreed with increased spending on homelessness and other indicators suggest that Canadians are very aware that the problem is no longer a big city problem and that solutions require senior government involvement not simply charity.
- In 1999 the federal government announced its homelessness strategy and SCPI (Supporting Community Partnership Initiative) funding which was renewed in 2003 for another 3 years. We hope it will be renewed yet again.
- In November 2001, the federal government announced its Affordable Housing Framework Agreement (\$680 million over years). In 2003 the federal government added \$320 million bringing the total to \$1 billion. The first new federal money since housing was slashed 10 years earlier.
- In June 2003 the TD Bank issued an economics report on affordable housing stating it was "one of Canada's most pressing public policy issues."
- The last federal budget contained zero \$ for housing but the Layton-Martin budget = \$1.6 billion for affordable housing over 2 years (still to be spent). C-48 the Budget Bill has still to this date not delivered. The federal government is delaying the rollout of the monies until March 2006, the end of the fiscal year, depending on if there is a surplus.

Today's reality in Ontario

Since signing the Federal-Provincial-Territorial (FPT) housing agreement in 2001, Ontario has promised a total of 46,332 units and delivered only 63. You might be surprised by these numbers because there have been something like 11 Ontario announcements with photo ops and ministers signing agreements. There have been 336 FPT announcements since 2001!. However, announcements of housing allocations are not the same as actual allotments for those units.

Until recently Ontario had 3 ministers with responsibility for housing. Do you know who they were? Minister Pupatello is Minister of Community Services and had the homeless, shelters and rent supplement file. Minister Caplan was Minister of Public Infrastructure and had the new affordable housing file. Minister Gerretsen is Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. He had part of the new housing file, plus rent regulation/tenant protection and social housing. Now housing finally has been simplified and its Minister Gerretsen's portfolio.

So, why so few new units of housing in Ontario?

Primarily, because the Ontario government since the 2001 signing of the FPT has been reluctant to match the federal dollars. Ontario's not alone, but is perhaps the stingiest. Other provinces have also cut their housing spending. Across the country, it's only Quebec that has been close to meeting its targets.

Ontario's recent promise of 400 rent supplements in the private market in Toronto only yielded an actual number of 40 – a hint of how the reliance on the private sector does not create housing.

Today's reality in Sarnia?

In *Where's Home 2004* (by the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada – Ontario Region) there is good news and bad news on Sarnia.

The good news: your vacancy rates have increased. In 2003 they were 6.1%.

The bad news: in 2000 – 46% of tenants paid more than 30% of their income on shelter and 22% paid more than 50%. So, almost half of tenants in Sarnia have an affordability problem.

You're not building. From 1999 – 2003 an average of 33 rental units were added annually. Your rental demand is expected to exceed supply.

You have been promised 25 new units and 40 housing allowances by the

province. There is no news yet on those allocations and I urge you to speak out to ensure those promises are kept.

What can you do in Sarnia-Lambton?

Well, as I suggest what you can do, it's important to keep in mind how to involve your local representatives.

Your MP is Liberal Roger Galloway and he's been in Ottawa representing you since 1993 – if you recall that was the last year the federal government allocated new dollars for affordable housing. Mr. Galloway's web site says he is well known nationally as an advocate for the needs of children. His other legislative interests include the oil and petrochemical business, regulated industries, consumer protection law and parliamentary reform. Mr. Galloway is an original member of the Parliamentary True Grit Band and sometime serious musician. He has appeared in galas for the International Symphony as well as being the narrator for a "Child's Introduction to the Symphony".

Your MPP is Liberal Caroline DiCocco and she is Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Children and Youth Services. Under 'Hot Topics' on her web site there was a lot of attention to environmental challenges – which is good and her web site certainly indicates she is responsive to community needs.

Since, I learned today that some of your homeless families with children are forced to use the motel system here for emergency shelter and only for a maximum of 30 days I think both of your elected reps should be invited to see first hand what that involves.

So, what can you do in Sarnia-Lambton?

1. Expose your problem as you are doing this week and talk about related issues. For example, you should be alarmed at layoffs and job loss in your community and labour should be an obvious ally in any work you do to create housing solutions. Consider arranging new and creative ways that you can invite the media, prominent community leaders and politicians to view first hand both your problems and your solutions.

2. Showcase your solutions – your innovative programs or housing. Look to natural partners like labour to kick-start new projects.
3. Who are your heroes and heroines – your local stars and how can they help raise the profile of your housing/homelessness issues. Well, once again, I did do some research and learned that a lot of famous people come from here. Golfer Mike Weir, musician Kim Mitchell, film director Patricia Rozema. Who else? How can you engage them?
4. Encourage your local level of government to create a municipal/regional strategy that includes ending homelessness and setting new housing or rehab targets. Yes, they'll need money from senior levels of government, but it is critical that your local leaders are in the plan.
5. Can your organization order the 1% solution buttons?
6. Can this symposium at the end of the day pass a motion that you could send to your MP or MPP or regional government?
7. I promise you I will write Minister Fontana about my concerns at what I have seen in my visit which have included: no adult shelter in the entire county, reliance on motels for shelter, huge geographic challenges for travel for low-income people, no transitional housing units, high food bank use, no detox or treatment centre, homeless adults and families forced out of the community because of a basic lack of services. I urge you to invite the Minister to your community for a tour that could be hosted by your Warden and County Mayors to see this first hand.
8. And lastly, I would suggest you look at whether your community really should consider continuing with its reliance on motel beds for emergency shelter or whether it's time you found a more satisfactory option. You have the luxury of land here, you have the luxury of a vacancy rate and houses that could be bought up cheap. There is money in this community, churches that are downsizing, corporations and unions that sound generous and surely there are ways you can take a new look at the use of these resources rather than a crummy motel room or worse, the loss of valuable community members to another community.

In the last 24 hours I've seen a glimpse of the housing/homeless issues right here in Sarnia-Lambton. There is a national housing movement and we need to bring the issues in Sarnia-Lambton to the forefront of that movement but we will need your help and your voice joining us. I've been pleased to see how

organized and cooperative your work is here and I wish you luck in the future.

Check with delivery