



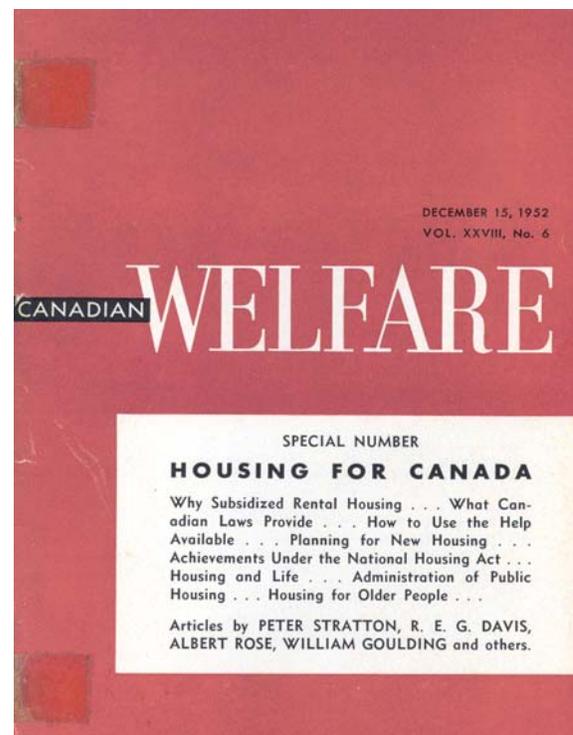
Housing Administration in Canada, 1952

By Albert Rose

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One qualified British planning authority who has spent a large part of the past two years in this country, saw fit to remark to the writer that “What seems to be the drill in Britain in housing administration appears to throw Canadians into a panic.” Despite a decade or more of qualified or partial experience in the administration of housing projects at the municipal level it does seem to be true that we are ill-equipped to undertake the responsibilities which our partnership in Section 35 involves. Without being overly concerned with “what seems to be the drill in Britain” we should like to make some comments upon the problems which may “throw Canadians into a panic”. Canadians, and their elected representatives and appointed administrative officials, are probably less experienced in the administration of public housing than the citizens of any other highly industrialized nation, because of our late entry into the field of public provision and administration of housing.

Opportunities for Canadian development in the technique of public housing administration have not been entirely lacking. In a number of provinces some limited numbers of dwelling units were built in the year or two following World War I under the provisions of provincial acts passed at that time. Early in World War II the establishment of Wartime Housing Limited provided further opportunity. Quite a number of municipalities signed agreements with the Government of Canada for administration of Wartime Housing Projects.



Elected and appointed officials and many citizens became concerned with the basic problems of public housing administration: provision of staff for administration, tenant selection, determination of rentals, physical maintenance, financial administration and accounting; tenant participation and responsibility, recreation and community organization. Provision of staff, tenant selection, and tenant participation and responsibility are the problems dealt with most fully in this article: the other problems are touched upon under these headings.

From November 1949, public housing provision became the responsibility of a partnership of governments at three levels in this country. The function of administering the local housing project was assigned specifically to the municipality. What makes the administration of public housing important is that modest numbers of such dwelling units are now beginning to be completed.

Staff for Housing Administration

The requirements for staff which, to date, have amounted to no more than a handful of people, are bound to increase by many times during the next decade. The difficulty in providing suitable staff for public housing administration is compounded of at least three major elements.

First, at the municipal level in this country, where the responsibility for administration lies, it is extremely difficult to introduce an outsider into the civic staff rolls, regardless of his experience or special qualifications for functions newly assumed by the municipality. (This is not uniquely a problem of public housing administration but one that is faced wherever new ventures in the broad field of social welfare are undertaken, as in the administration of day nurseries, day care centres, homes for the aged, community centres and recreation.) Someone is likely to be appointed from already existing departments of municipal government to administer the housing project. This in itself does not necessarily mean poor administration, but on the other hand we cannot always expect to be as fortunate as the City of Toronto has proved to be in the Regent Park project.

Second, there remains in this country a rather widespread reluctance to employ persons trained in, or associated with, the profession of social work, in the public administration of social welfare or related activities. This is just as true in the field of public housing administration, despite the substantial social work component in the job, involving as it does case work, group work and community organization skills particularly. Consequently, we find persons largely untrained in the processes of social work undertaking social work functions. There is, however, frank admission that "we may have to come to that" when the question of the employment of social workers is asked.

Third, our economy-minded municipal authorities are primarily concerned with spending as little money as possible on public housing administration. What better way is there to achieve this than to combine administrative, financial and social work responsibilities in one employee? As the project is constructed and the tasks grow in simple magnitude, something is bound to give—usually the health of the administrator.

The basic requirement for adequate housing administration in Canada at the present time is training facilities. Although four universities now offer courses of instruction in Community Planning in which considerable attention is devoted to housing, no facilities exist inside or outside of University settings (with the exception of an in-service training program for personnel of CMHC) for training people to administer public housing.

The problem of staff development raises a number of important considerations. There is, of course, the obvious need for more people equipped to serve on the administrative staffs of public housing projects. Of more importance, however, is the undeniable fact that these people need a great variety of skills. This need should be met by training a large number of persons equipped to handle one, or at the most two, aspects of the administrative responsibility rather than to attempt to train a very few persons in a great number of skills.

Persons are needed who are skilled in the care and maintenance of buildings, in budgeting and financial administration, in working with people who require help with individual or family problems, in working with groups, and in working with entire communities. Surely it is evident that one or two persons cannot be expected to assume all these responsibilities.

The following is a suggested breakdown of the kinds of people needed and the kinds of responsibilities they might assume:

Nature of Staff and Responsibilities for Public Housing Administration

1. Executive Director. To act as Secretary of the Housing Authority which determines overall policy; to be responsible to the Housing Authority for the operation and maintenance of housing projects; to be responsible for interpreting the policies of the Housing Authority to the tenants and the overall needs of the tenants to the Housing Authority; to be responsible for liaison between the Housing Authority, the School Board, the Department of Parks and Recreation, and so on.

2. Housing Manager. To manage the business affairs of a project; to be responsible for the physical operation and maintenance of the property; to interpret the physical requirements to the Executive Director and to the tenants; to be responsible for liaison between the Housing Authority and the departments of municipal government concerned with the physical provision of services.

3. Counsellor(s). To be responsible to the Executive Director for helping tenants in solving the individual and social problems of adapting themselves to life in the new environment. There are three distinct responsibilities that counsellors should take: (a) work with individuals, (b) work with groups, and (c) work with the community (both the new community formed by the housing project and the larger community of which it forms a part).

(a) To help individual tenants and their families to meet personal problems; to refer individuals and families to appropriate community health and welfare agencies; to interpret the health and welfare needs of the tenants to the Executive Director; to help tenants to adjust to life in the public housing community.

(b) To work with groups of tenants in adjusting to group life in the public housing project; to assist in the development of recreation, adult education and other group activities within the public housing project, as desired by the tenants; to work with staff persons in such municipal departments as Parks and Recreation in planning such group activities as the tenants may deem desirable.

(c) To assist tenants to adjust to a new community; to help them organize a Tenants' Association (see below); to plan with the elected officers of the Tenants' Association the

program of the Association in consideration of overall problems of community life in a public housing project.

4. The Accountant. To be responsible to the Executive Director or Housing Manager in collecting rents; to maintain the essential bookkeeping services; to maintain control of current expenditures in accord with estimated line-by-line budgets; to prepare budget estimates for consideration by the Executive Director and the Housing Authority.

This tabulation may be regarded as an “ideal” breakdown of staff and individual responsibilities. The writer holds no brief for the job titles, but suggests that the responsibilities are real and must be provided for. If the project houses a large number of families, more than one counsellor will be required. When this is the case, each of them should have special qualifications for the particular job he is expected to do. However the housing project is staffed, it is essential that some one should be specifically responsible for dealing with the human problems that inevitably arise when people move into a new and strange situation, especially when they are thrown into contact with people to whom the situation is equally new and strange. It is possible in some cases that pre-school education might be desirable within the project, and this would require additional staff with skills in nursery school education.

It is obvious that not all of these individual staff persons will be university trained. Desirably the executive director and the persons responsible for working with individuals and groups and in inter-group relationships should receive instruction and experience under the auspices of appropriate university departments. In-service training programs might be provided under university auspices in the short run. Whatever the training method employed, it is absolutely essential that training facilities be provided in the very near future in this country.

Tenant Selection—Segregation or Balanced Diversification?

It is quite clear that there is a sharp difference between the construction of a public housing project on vacant land where no residents are displaced, and the re-development of an area for housing purposes, more popularly known as slum-clearance. In the latter situation it is inevitable that the persons and families who vacate dwellings slated for demolition must be assigned priority as tenants for the new public housing. To this extent, the problem is relatively easy. Tenants, pre-selected in this “accident” of the designation of areas for urban re-development, can usually be shifted about within the project area as clearance and construction proceed in well-defined stages. The administrators of the Regent Park project in Toronto have been little short of masterly in their handling of this situation.

When the project is created on vacant land, or when the redevelopment provides for considerably greater numbers of dwelling units than those demolished in the process of clearance, we face an entirely different set of problems. Pre-selected tenant families come in known sizes and may be of any recognized income grouping. After this priority group is housed, what criteria are available to guide the selection of tenants? It appears that the major criteria must be family income, need for housing accommodation in consideration of present shelter occupied, and displacement of certain families as a result of other current re-development and community planning activities.

In the Regent Park project in Toronto, the number of tenants to be selected from outside the re-development area will ultimately be greater than the number within the original

priority group. To these familiar criteria the only one added to date by the Toronto Housing Authority in considering non-priority tenants, is some form of “veteran status”. The income limit has been determined at \$4,800 per annum total family income; tenants, to be eligible, must have no more than this income. If comparative need for housing accommodation among thousands of applicants is to be evaluated seriously, it is clear that the administrative staff must be augmented substantially.

One of the most fundamental problems in tenant selection and public housing administration, namely the achievement of a balanced diversification and the avoidance of any form of segregation among the tenant group, has received scarcely any attention in this country. Although many of us became interested in public housing because of its possibilities for re-housing the lowest income groups, it has become clear that public housing projects which merely provide only for certain social or economic groups in the population can be little more than twentieth-century “ghettos”. The wartime and postwar emergency shelter projects inside and outside our major cities are cases in point.

It is abhorrent to think that Canadian public housing projects may house only low-income families, or families of veterans, or young families with two or more children, or middle-income families, or aged persons or couples, and set these groups apart from the rest of the community. The twin goals of diversification and balance are not impossible of achievement if imagination, research and experimentation are applied. One simple suggestion for economic diversification and balance would be to provide that 40 per cent of the tenant families be within the lowest third of the income range governing eligibility, 40 per cent be within the middle third and 20 per cent in the upper third of the income range. This form of distribution might or might not provide total revenues from rentals equal to estimated economic rentals, but it would ensure relatively modest losses (subsidies) in periods of full employment. It is not improbable that satisfactory formulae governing age distribution and family structure could be developed.

Tenant Participation and Responsibility

In many of the Wartime Housing Projects of the period 1941-1945, the building, equipping, staffing and programming of a community centre afforded some opportunity for tenant participation and responsibility, but these centres were noticeably one of the first casualties of the early postwar period.

It is not surprising, in view of the unfortunate association of public housing and “charity” in the public mind, that scant attention is being paid at this time to the role of the tenant of public housing as a person, as a citizen, and as a responsible participant in the administration of the project. Moreover, there is not likely to be a staff person able to assist him in adapting himself to the strange life in an entirely new community or neighbourhood. He is likely to be issued a handbook of rules and regulations dealing with such significant questions as animal pets, flower pots on window-sills, and television aerials. No mention will be made of the way in which he may stand for election to the Housing Authority because the tenants are represented only through the staff. The executive staff person, in turn, is hard put to it to sort out the justifiable complaints and reasonable suggestions he receives, from the prejudices of cranks and the representations of expropriated owners of former slum dwellings.

Tenants’ associations are most particularly “part of the drill” in Great Britain and in many other countries. A great deal has been written about their invaluable contribution in maintaining morale, instilling a sense of responsibility and participation, and generally assist-

ing and facilitating housing administration. One writer has stated that . . . “devolution of many management questions to tenants may be both desirable and practicable.” Consulting tenants on rents, regulations, and repairs is considered advisable by some English housing managers. In addition, “open discussion leads to a very much better understanding than in private explanation by the housing manager to each tenant.”

Our preoccupation to date has been with planning, inter-governmental negotiation, and day-to-day problems of construction, and this is one reason why the tenants’ role in administration has been neglected. Such neglect may easily prevent the growth of first class citizenship which participation and responsibility would foster.

No matter how benevolent the administrative staff may be, through personal inclination or as a matter of policy, the basic objective is not the creation of a benevolent autocracy or benevolent paternalism. The only real way of avoiding bureaucratic administration and benevolent paternalism lies in the devolution of certain aspects of administration to the tenants through the creation and encouragement of an independent Tenants’ Association. To the extent that the tenants of Canadian public housing develop a sense of responsibility and participation, to that extent will the basic objectives of public housing, namely the provision of adequate shelter and an opportunity for a fuller life in an adequate community setting, be realized.

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Dr. Albert Rose, who wrote this article, is now a member of the national council of the Community Planning Association of Canada, having been previously vice-chairman of the Greater Toronto Branch and chairman of the Ontario Division. He is an associate professor at the Toronto School of Social Work, and since 1948 has been responsible for instruction in housing there. In 1950 he was director of an experimental research study of housing conditions and needs in an Ontario city, for Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, the report of which is now being prepared.