

Canadian Conference on Homelessness

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Housing and Homelessness

No Homeland for the Poor: Houselessness and Canada's Unhoused Population

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"Some will die. The sick will get sicker, the well will become ill. In the spring, the survivors will be grateful for warmth. It will be safe again to sleep in the parks and on the riverbanks. Those are homelands in the country of the poor."

– June Callwood, *The Globe and Mail*, 1987

We are now approaching the mid-point in the first decade of this century. And here we are at yet another huge national conference on homelessness.

Homelessness is the extreme expression of social exclusion. All Canadians have the right to adequate housing and to an adequate standard of living – if, in this country, they can pay for it. These fundamentals of life are for sale and are readily available in Canada – if you have the money.

We are not gathered here because great progress has been made down the road of social inclusion – reforming our systems so that all have the fundamentals of a full and productive life. We have little to celebrate. The level of need, the level of concern and the number of people and agencies involved has grown. The number of people who are unhoused and especially those who are at risk of losing their housing is also growing. And now, some are dying.

Since politicians and policy-makers like numbers, I have four numbers for them.

5 ½

It is now 5 ½ years since the federal government's homelessness initiative was announced in December 1999. This created the modest community grant program called Supporting Communities Partnerships Initiative (SCPI).

The Speech from the Throne two months before the announcement (October 12, 1999) mentioned that the "government will continue working ... to address the *root causes* of homelessness." The minister further explained that the federal government would become "a partner in a national effort to eliminate homelessness." We now know that the program announced 5½ years ago and recently extended has nothing to do with the *root causes*, nor has it contributed to *eliminating* homelessness. (Claudette Bradshaw, Government of Canada press release, December 17, 1999)

6

It is now 6 years since 300 participants gathered in Toronto for the National Homelessness Summit in March 1999. This was to be the time and place for the federal government to take action – though it did not do so. There was nothing in the budget that year that addressed housing and homelessness. Canada's homeless people, instead, were given their very own federal minister, who promptly travelled around the country, literally hugging many of them. There are more homeless people today than six years ago. The critics were right when they complained at the time that the appointment of a minister without a mandate or money was simply a publicity stunt aimed at deflecting criticism of the government. The appointment was made just a day before the National Summit and several months before the federal election. There were plenty of press releases and hugs, but no effort to get at the root causes as promised.

15

It is exactly 15 years since Paul Martin and Joe Fontana released, on May 14, 1990, their report, "Finding Room: Housing Solutions for the Future, Report of the National Liberal Caucus Task Force On Housing." In it, they assert:

"The federal role in housing must not be a residual one. The connection between housing and other aspects of both social and economic policy means that the federal government must take a lead role. Only the federal government has the power to equalize access to housing. If this responsibility is to be taken seriously, then a wide range of policy instruments are required."

from Chapter 3, "Housing: The Cause of and ... a Potential Solution to Poverty in Canada."

20

It will soon be 20 years since the 1987 United Nations International Year of Shelter for the Homeless and the Canadian national conference on homelessness, which was attended by 1,400 people in September of that year.

During the 1987 International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, June Callwood, then a columnist for *The Globe and Mail*, wrote a series of articles about homelessness in Canada.

Her final article began with these two sentences:

"Whatever else may unify a nation of such disparate pieces as this one, it is clear from a journey across the country that the poor have no regional boundaries. They occupy one country, poverty, and wherever they may happen to live, whatever their age or the language they speak, the similarities in their skewed lives unite them and make them one country, indivisible." *The Globe and Mail*, November 21, 1987.

When she wrote this in 1987, the purchasing power of social assistance payments was greater than it is today. More poor people were also allowed to qualify. We know these changes apply to most categories of social supports – except for the supports aimed at those who are already well off.

5 ½ + 6 + 15 + 20 = ??

What do these numbers add up to? Not much.

Thanks to public policy decisions, we now have two countries. One is Canada, the other is... what? Where do the socially excluded "live"? Where is their "homeland"? Where do they call "home"?

Canada now offers the option of destitution and social exclusion so complete, so comprehensive, that it includes being unhoused, poorly nourished, and in a declining state of health.

The first necessary step to social inclusion is well-known. We all need a house so we can develop a sound "home" for ourselves. The subtitle of June Callwood's 1987 column was "Affordable housing the key across whole country."

"Housing is seen everywhere as the key issue in the nation of the poor. Poverty will be relieved, the front-line people say, when housing is stable and affordable. They think the country is beginning to understand that."

Here we are 18 years later. Yet, how many times have we heard, and do we continue to hear, that homelessness is not a housing problem?

One thing that the members of this diverse group called "homeless people" have in common is the lack of an adequate place to live. They are all houseless.

What we call homelessness is not *simply* a housing problem, but it is *always* a housing problem.

To have a home, with its social, psychological, emotional space, requires a house, a private physical space. Everyone in Canada has his or her own private space to relax and recover and in which to create a home – except Canada's unhoused people. They have no private space and they are often hounded from public spaces. Where is *their* homeland in this vast and rich country?

A plan to end Canada's mass houselessness is required, not year-to-year grant programs that support people in the houseless state. Unhoused people do not want further services that may make them a bit more comfortable while their physical and emotional health declines due to a lack of a place to live. Go ask them which they would choose.

A plan to end mass houselessness does not require more civil servants, more social workers, and more social agency staff to support people in their unhoused state. We do not need a growing homelessness support industry in Canada.

However, after all these years, and with just a few exceptions, that is all that we have to show for our efforts.

It all comes down to money. Housing is expensive and the supportive housing some people need is even more expensive. Yes, emergency services are also expensive, but they are doled out under short-term programs, and they only help some in need. As such, they mainly serve as a cheaper option for politicians, as a public funded fig leaf for politicians who do not want to act. The cheaper ineffective option allows them to claim they are taking action. Take a look at all the press releases and press conferences when a local agency is given a bit of money to enhance some service.

The consequences of not doing the right thing are as obvious today as they were 18 years ago. June Callwood ended her final IYSH column that I have been quoting from in this way:

"No city in Canada yet has a sufficient supply of affordable permanent housing. There is therefore no hope for the homeless this winter, or for those who occupy vile rooming houses and hotels.

"Some will die. The sick will get sicker, the well will become ill. In the spring, the survivors will be grateful for warmth. It will be safe again to sleep in the parks and on the riverbanks. Those are homelands in the country of the poor.

So what about the future?

Four more numbers – Options

We can be cynical and think that attempts to turn the trends around will always fail.

Or, we can look at what has been achieved by community action against extremely tough odds.

Some members of the National Housing and Homelessness Network and the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee have drafted a resolution for this conference to adopt and for your own local organizations and networks to adopt and work toward.

Instead of dwelling on the sad history I have related – the four numbers that don't add up to much – you can look at the four numbers in the resolution you have before you.

- 1) we call on the federal, provincial/territorial and municipal levels of government, in cooperation with people who are homeless and poor, civil society institutions – including, but not limited to non-governmental organizations, charities, faith communities, women's organizations, people with disabilities, LGBTTTQ organizations, unions and racialized communities - and Aboriginal communities and organizations, to develop and agree to, as a matter of top priority (within six months) a national strategy to end homelessness with specific goals, targets and time frames including the adoption, by every municipality, with enabling legislation where required, a blueprint and implementation plan for the elimination of homelessness;
- 2) we call on the federal and provincial/territorial governments to provide the funding necessary to fully implement the national strategy and local, community-driven, community-based blueprints to end homelessness through a special funding package for (1) adequate housing, (2) adequate income support, and (3) adequate support services to implement the

local blueprints; that a clear statement of responsibilities of different levels of government be defined (one that does not rely on joint funding); that an inter-governmental body be appointed to oversee compliance and progress toward the goals; and that this inter-governmental body have independence from the government of the day (such as the auditor's offices) and that it be given a mechanism through which affected constituencies can be heard, complaints considered and inter-governmental conflicts resolved;

- 3) we call on local, regional and national civil society institutions across the country to mobilize support for the local blueprints to end homelessness and to help ensure that spending is allocated to this top social priority by all levels of government;
- 4) we call on the business community, large and small and local and national corporations, and national corporate lobby organizations, to actively join in with civil society organizations and governments in a partnership that ensures highest priority is given to ending homelessness and that adequate resources are allocated as a matter of top priority;

There is a fifth point in the resolution – an affirmation that we all know is valid in a country as successful and wealthy as Canada.

- 5) we affirm that a dedicated national effort can end the mass homelessness now common throughout Canada within five years and that the few remaining shelters necessary for emergency use in our communities will be used for very short-term stays.

This is a worthy and achievable goal.

The time is right with the passage of the improved federal budget. The previously promised money plus the new money for housing and homelessness can either be used wisely in a coordinated effort as outlined here – or it can be wasted in a hodgepodge of initiatives that help specific politicians in specific regions of the country – another press release program for the government.

Let's work together to make sure that we make progress -- that we address the root causes (adequate housing, income, and support services). Only then will we make steady progress towards eliminating homelessness and only then can we meet again at a conference like this in a few years and celebrate real progress and further define the next steps.

Canadian Conference on Homelessness, Toronto, May 2005

Resolution

WHEREAS the provision of and access to adequate housing is a fundamental human right according to paragraph 25(1) of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads as follows:

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”;

WHEREAS in 1976 Canada signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, a legally binding treaty, committing Canada to make progress on fully realizing all economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to adequate housing, as outlined in paragraph 11(1) of the Covenant:

“The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right”;

WHEREAS the enjoyment of other human rights, such as those to privacy, to respect for the home, to freedom of movement, to freedom from discrimination, to environmental health, to security of the person, to freedom of association, and to the equal protection and benefit of the law are indivisible from and indispensable to the realization of the right to adequate housing;

WHEREAS the measures required of State Parties to the Covenant arise out of paragraph 2(1) of the Covenant, which provides that State Parties undertake to take steps to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures;

WHEREAS the United Nations Committee has been highly critical of Canada's failure to make progress in guaranteeing the right to adequate housing for all Canadians, in light of Canada's relative affluence, a criticism made most recently in its concluding observations of December 10, 1998:

“The Committee is gravely concerned that such a wealthy country as Canada has allowed the problem of homelessness and inadequate housing to grow to such proportions that the mayors of Canada's 10 largest cities have now declared homelessness a national disaster”;

WHEREAS the United Nations Committee issued a specific recommendation that Canada implement a national strategy aimed at reducing homelessness and poverty, which reads, in part:

“The Committee recommends that the federal, provincial and territorial governments address homelessness and inadequate housing as a national emergency by reinstating or increasing, as the case may be, social housing programs for those in need, improving and properly enforcing anti-discrimination legislation in the field of housing, increasing shelter allowances and social assistance rates to realistic levels, providing adequate support services for persons with disabilities, improving protection of security of tenure for tenants and improving protection of affordable rental housing stock from conversion to other uses. The Committee urges the State Party to implement a national strategy for the reduction of homelessness and poverty”;

WHEREAS Canada's wealth and national budget are more than adequate to ensure that every woman, child, and man residing in Canada has secure, adequate, accessible, and affordable housing as part of a standard of living that will provide healthy, physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social development and a good quality of life;

AND WHEREAS achievement of improved housing conditions is best realized through cooperative partnerships of government and civil society and the meaningful involvement of local communities;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that

- 1) we call on the federal, provincial/territorial and municipal levels of government, in cooperation with people who are homeless and poor, civil society institutions – including, but not limited to non-governmental organizations, charities, faith communities, women's organizations, people with disabilities, LGBTTTQ organizations, unions and racialized communities - and Aboriginal communities and organizations, to develop and agree to, as a matter of top priority (within six months) a national strategy to end homelessness with specific goals, targets and time frames including the adoption, by every municipality, with enabling legislation where required, a blueprint and implementation plan for the elimination of homelessness;
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- 3) we call on local, regional and national civil society institutions across the country to mobilize support for the local blueprints to end homelessness and to help ensure that spending is allocated to this top social priority by all levels of government;
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- 5) we affirm that a dedicated national effort can end the mass homelessness now common throughout Canada within five years and that the few remaining shelters necessary for emergency use in our communities will be used for very short-term stays.

THE HOMELESS: No regional boundaries for poor
Affordable housing the key across whole country

by **JUNE CALLWOOD**

21 November 1987, The Globe and Mail

The United Nations has declared this year to be International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. Globe and Mail columnist June Callwood has travelled coast to coast to see first-hand the plight of some of Canada's "resident strangers." Today's article is the last of a series.

Whatever else may unify a nation of such disparate pieces as this one, it is clear from a journey across the country that the poor have no regional boundaries. They occupy one country, poverty, and wherever they may happen to live, whatever their age or the language they speak, the similarities in their skewed lives unite them and make them one country, indivisible.

This was nowhere more striking than in Montreal, where the two solitudes, English and French, merge in the common misery of their predicament. While there are soup kitchens that ostensibly are English and soup kitchens with French names, homeless people of both founding groups are lined up together, unified by the humiliating hunger they have in common.

The poor acquire citizenship in their country of the condemned in certain clichéd ways that are the same in Vancouver as in Halifax. Everywhere, the poor are growing younger as the country seems to have developed, simultaneously, an epidemic of grossly incapable parents, substitute care by the state that often serves only to intensify the child's wretchedness, and an economy that does not require unskilled youth - prostitutes excepted.

Everywhere the fastest-growing definable subgroup within the nationhood of poverty is the one that consists of young mothers and their children. Poverty strikes them most acutely in the shortage across the nation of affordable housing, with the consequence that their lives are precarious and unstable. Everywhere, their children have wild eyes and teachers worry.

Most poor women have been beaten by men on whom they depended. That truth has become banal, but the beatings are real nonetheless and

convey a message of worthlessness which poverty exacerbates.

Many of the poor are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or both, though it is difficult to know whether they are really addicts or are merely making sensible use of what in their environment is a socially accepted, congenial and effective, if temporary, escape.

Some of the poor are mad and stroll the streets shouting at their visions. The benign effect stable housing might have on their illness is only beginning to be explored.

Many of the poor are men who did what traditional males pride themselves on doing: fighting a war, working at back-bending hard labor. Something went wrong and couldn't be fixed: the war broke their hearts and their being; the jobs dried up; someone died or left and the grief of it could not be borne.

Everywhere, the poor live one day at a time with a fixed goal: to find at least one meal. In winter in this climate of killing cold they have a second - to keep from freezing.

The quest is so primitive and brutal that a person must deaden the soul to do it. In a soup kitchen somewhere last week a nattily dressed old man was eating daintily as he explained that he had spent the day painting a landscape. The room was so proud of him, so aware of what such a victory of the spirit represented, that it was a telling moment.

Also universal and interchangeable are the people who care. Every city in the country has one or 10 of them and they make a fine array. Though university-educated and articulate members of the

upper middle class, they work for wages so debased their circumstances are little better than those they strive to serve. What moved them initially to divert from more promising careers was compassion and respect for people they saw as essentially decent and valuable human beings in distress, as helpless as people caught in a mine cave-in. What keeps them at it, however, is the exhilaration of being at the centre of a good fight that might alter the face of poverty.

They wade rivers of bureaucratic bungling and political insensitivity and public indifference with determination because they have the right questions: Why does this affluent country need soup lines? How can it be that people live in cars and cardboard boxes?

A news release issued last August for the Canadian conference on homelessness that was held in Ottawa said that homelessness is "a much broader and deeper phenomenon than most Canadians believe." In communities across the country are signs that something is changing: housing

for the poor is being developed with self-contained units; the concept of the need for supportive staff through transition periods is being acknowledged; food banks are being questioned, not for their present validity but for their apparent willingness to continue to exist forever.

Housing is seen everywhere as the key issue in the nation of the poor. Poverty will be relieved, the front-line people say, when housing is stable and affordable. They think the country is beginning to understand that.

However, no city in Canada yet has a sufficient supply of affordable permanent housing. There is therefore no hope for the homeless this winter, or for those who occupy vile rooming houses and hotels.

Some will die. The sick will get sicker, the well will become ill. In the spring, the survivors will be grateful for warmth. It will be safe again to sleep in the parks and on the riverbanks. Those are homeless lands in the country of the poor.