



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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One hell of a winter unless province steps up on EIA and housing

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Can you imagine your grandma deciding that sleeping outside is safer than in a shelter? For 75 year old Granny D, this was the choice she made during COVID 19. She did not want to be inside for fear of catching the virus due to pre-existing health conditions, her disability and her age. Starting in March she stopped sleeping at Just a Warm Sleep, a winter emergency shelter run by 1JustCity. Our team of volunteers and staff check in on Granny D, who is homeless, and bring her necessities. But what will she do now that the weather is about to get just as dangerous as the pandemic?

What she needs is affordable housing, mental health supports and a place where she feels she belongs. Instead we've only seen a decrease in social housing and pittance of support for vulnerable people. COVID not only worsens our province's poverty crisis but it has made it more difficult for people experiencing poverty to access the dignity of a washroom, a place to wash their hands or a place to warm up in the coming cold. Essential community daytime drop ins, warming areas and homeless shelters have had to drastically reduce capacity due to social distancing. Tent cities are going to become more frequent unless we see a fast increase in social housing. With the provincial eviction moratorium coming to an end, more people will end up facing homelessness with less

resources than ever to support them.

Charities and community centres that provide basic necessities have already seen huge increases in demand while having to dramatically alter services to ensure the safety of staff and community members. Winnipeg Harvest reported an increase of 30 per cent in food bank use across Winnipeg during COVID and 1JustCity, which runs three inner city drop-in sites saw double the amount of people needing meals.

With winter just around the corner, we need an immediate plan to ensure people experiencing homelessness across Manitoba can access warm spaces to stay safe from the cold. We also need the province to step up and provide more social housing and income support for vulnerable Manitobans to prevent further homelessness, poverty and the spread of COVID.

Governments need to adequately finance emergency shelter plans, enough shelter beds and safe drop in spaces this winter to meet increased demand. Recently announced provincial funding for the existing homelessness shelter system in Winnipeg will only support the status quo. It is promising to see a Request For Proposals from the provincial government for 24/7 Safe Spaces in urban centres for those struggling with homelessness and mental illness. But

there is an alternative.

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this is not enough. As a winter emergency centre with three day shelters offering lunches, 1JustCity was able to supply other non-profits with meals to share with the homeless community during the pandemic. Many of the non profits 1Just City shared its bounty with stressed that they were barely making it through. On top of this, sanitizing is a full time job and many non-profits don't have the staffing costs covered for this new role. All of this while the need for shelter services are increasing as we try to do more with the same level of resources.

Social and supported housing is desperately needed to move people out of shelters and prevent others from becoming homeless. Shelters must be supported to work to house folks, and reduce the transitions into homelessness from CFS care, imprisonment and fleeing abuse. But the housing needs to be there. This means adequately funding housing along the housing spectrum: transitional, congregate, and social housing. The Department of Families, Housing division's role is to provide social and affordable housing throughout the province, however the province has not built any new social housing units since 2016.

Low-cost housing in Manitoba is hard to come by, particularly housing with social supports for those with particular needs. Meanwhile the province is selling off public housing, where rents are geared to one's ability to pay, to shed public assets. These units will not be replaced because there is no financial incentive for the private market to provide low income housing, there is no profit in it.

Provincial welfare or EIA is a program of last resort and abysmally low: a single adult gets only \$800 total a month for all expenses. When CERB was announced, some on EIA applied as they thought they qualified and they needed money to survive during COVID. Regardless if they qualified or not, EIA is closing their files. Now that CERB is ending, these folks will have to reapply to get back on EIA, resulting in no income for months. With the lifting of the eviction ban on October 1 those who have no income for

rent will become homeless. Community advocates are calling for EIA to keep these files open and bring people back onto welfare immediately. Manitoba must heed the call of front-line anti-poverty advocates to provide emergency COVID EIA financial assistance of \$300 a month during COVID, and transition to a better program instead of EIA, like a Liveable Basic Needs Benefit. Otherwise the poverty crisis in Manitoba is about to get a lot worse.

The cost of doing nothing provincially during COVID on EIA and housing is massive. Studies show it costs upwards of \$55,000 a year in taxpayer funded emergency services per homeless person, but housing with support costs \$6,300 - \$20,000 a year, depending if folks have moderate or high needs. Not to mention the problems of COVID spreading in over-crowded housing or homeless camps. The preventive solution, social housing, requires upfront government support, but saves taxpayers hugely in the long run.

The Manitoba government needs to look objectively at who is truly vulnerable socially and economically in the COVID crisis and ensure they have access to shelter while adequately funding EIA and housing options to prevent loss of life and transmission of COVID this winter.

Tessa Blaikie WhiteCloud is the Executive Director of 1JustCity, an organization that supports three drop-in community centres in Winnipeg's core neighbourhoods: West Broadway, the West End and Osborne Village. In the winter months they run the pop up warming centre in Osborne Village: Just a Warm Sleep.

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