



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

February 26, 2013

Excuse me, Canada, your homelessness is showing

Dear Canada,

This is a little awkward, but I wanted to let you know before it gets any worse: your homelessness is showing.

It used to be that Canada had hardly any homeless people, and a social housing model that was lauded around the world. But now it's been 20 years since federal funding was frozen for housing programs, longer than that since the gradual withdrawal from housing began.

Today, Canada is the only G8 country without a national housing strategy, and it shows: it's estimated that about 300,000 Canadians are homeless, and about 1.7 million Canadians have trouble affording their housing. There are shelters and food banks in pretty much every Canadian city for men, women and children who don't have a place to live or food to eat. It's been going on for a while, and although our governments try to ignore it, it's become an international embarrassment.

Here in Manitoba, we can see the problem clearly. Housing costs are rising at a much faster pace than incomes: from 2005 to 2012, average rents increased by 33 percent, while the minimum wage rose only by 19.5 percent. Vacancy rates have been hovering around 1 percent for years, making it extremely difficult to find a place to live, even for households who can afford good housing. For the 88,000 Winnipeggers who live below the after tax low-income cut-off, finding good quality, affordable housing is close to impossible.

In Manitoba, about 45,000 households live in core housing need, which means they are spending too much on housing and/or that their housing is too small or in poor condition. This situation is especially grave for renters; about one in four renter households lives in core housing need. The University of Winnipeg has estimated that in Winnipeg alone, "there are about 135,000 people at risk of becoming homeless, 7600 'hidden' homeless, 1,915 short-term or crisis sheltered people and 350 living on the streets".

These families and individuals face tough choices in meeting their housing needs.

When people have to decide between paying the rent and paying for food, medicine, or other essentials, they experience more stress. Lack of good quality housing has been linked to poor health and educational outcomes. Ensuring that everyone has good housing can reduce societal costs related to healthcare and the justice system. In the end, making sure that we all have good housing benefits everyone.

Since the early 1990s, when the federal government pulled out of housing, housing has been considered to be the responsibility of the provinces. Over the last few years in Manitoba, the Province has invested significant resources in housing: it is updating and renovating much of its housing stock,

there is an alternative.

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and has committed to building 1500 new units of social housing. In addition, as funding agreements between the federal government and non-profit housing providers expire, the Province has stepped in to provide subsidies for the rent-geared to income units to ensure that these units are not lost.

However, there is a limit to how much the Province alone can shoulder. The cost is great and Manitoba, indeed all provinces, need more support from the federal government.

On February 27, 2013, the House of Commons will discuss Bill C-400, a private member's bill to develop a national strategy to address housing and homelessness in Canada. If Bill C-400 is passed, the Minister responsible for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) would consult with provincial housing ministers as well as with municipalities, First Nations, housing providers and civil society groups to develop a strategy for housing.

A national strategy to address housing and homelessness would bring stakeholders and the Government of Canada together to develop targets and timelines to address housing issues and eliminate homelessness. It would develop programs to ensure that everyone has access to good quality, affordable housing, including programs for populations that are especially vulnerable such as people with physical or mental disabilities, single-parent families, and older adults.

This strategy would enhance and support the housing programs already in place, and would provide additional resources to eliminate homelessness and precarious housing in Canada. This would make a big difference for the hundreds of thousands of Manitobans who live in poor quality, insecure housing—or who don't have housing at all.

Last year, the House of Commons unanimously passed a motion that stated that “the government should keep with

Canada's obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the right to housing under the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (House of Commons, 2012). Bill C-400 is the next step in fulfilling the right to housing, and ensuring that all Canadians have access to safe, good quality, affordable housing.

Let's hope that the House of Commons will also pass this bill unanimously. Come on, Canada, it's about time we fixed this embarrassing problem.

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