

10. Housing and Homelessness

The official indicators point to a serious, province-wide housing crisis. The face of the crisis looks different in Windsor, Belleville, North Bay or Guelph, but everywhere it has particular impact on women, aboriginal, youth, seniors and people with disabilities.

The roots of the crisis include the interrelated issues of affordability, supply and discrimination. The official Ontario rental vacancy rate is a critically low 1.7 percent. The real picture shows that the situation is much worse. For example, skyrocketing electricity rates and a deposit requirement of \$800 in Muskoka is driving tenants out of their homes.

A recent study submitted to Sault Ste. Marie City Council last January identifies 20 homeless people sleeping rough on the streets, 112 staying in homeless shelters, and nearly 20 percent of the entire population classified as “hidden homeless.” This includes “couch-surfers,” people in jails, and those crowded into substandard accommodation.

Counting the “hidden homeless” across the province creates a negative vacancy rate for Ontario. This gives a better picture of the true housing crisis. Average rents are increasing rapidly at double the rate of inflation or higher, but tenant incomes are stagnant or declining. In most parts of the province, welfare and other income programs, along with the minimum wage, do not provide enough income for tenants to afford their rent. Discrimination, either overt or structural, has a major impact for many in Ontario, especially aboriginal people, women, youth, families and children, people of colour, newcomers, people on social assistance and others.

Ontario is the richest province in one of the richest countries in the world. Our province has the financial resources to ensure every resident access to good quality, decent, safe and affordable housing. Spending on housing and income assistance is an investment in people. It creates valuable assets such as housing, and generates economic activity, including jobs and tax revenues. We join with our colleagues in the National Housing and Homelessness Network in calling for renewed federal housing and social spending.

Since 1995, the Ontario government has made deliberate choices to give priority to tax cuts that primarily benefit wealthy individuals and corporations, instead of social programs, including housing, that benefit the 4.5 million people living in renter households. Currently, the province spends about \$12 billion on tax cuts, yet spends zero dollars on new housing supply, and a decreasing amount on many other vital social programs. It explicitly relies on the private sector to deliver housing and other basic services.

The federal government has abandoned its historic role in funding new housing and other social programs. Private developers and landlords have failed over the past six years to deliver the housing that people need. This experiment has failed and the signs of the failure are in the human and economic costs of the province-wide housing crisis. Contrary to the provincial government's promise of 15,000 new units annually, the actual delivery has been less than 2,000. Most of these are not affordable. This is the same provincial government that introduced major changes weakening tenant protection laws.

There is a history of success in addressing housing needs in Ontario. We don't lack solutions, but we have a critical lack of political will, and the proper allocation of government resources, to apply them. For instance, aboriginal housing providers effectively manage more than 2,000 urban units. But provincial government decisions, including the cancellation of new housing supply programs in 1995 and cuts to various services, have disrupted or destroyed a valuable community infrastructure.

Recommendations for A People's Charter:

The provincial government must take immediate and effective action on the following points:

- ***New supply.***
 - *The Ontario Ministry of Finance's "mid-range" scenario projects the need for an additional 18,400 new units annually. The province must fund new supply to meet this projection. The first priority should be households that need it the most.*
 - *Funding for new social housing supply should be conditional on non-discriminatory rental practices. The stock should remain affordable.*
 - *A fully funded program to create 18,400 units would cost about \$900 million annually. A full range of housing options is needed in all parts of the province, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, supportive housing for tenants with special needs and permanent housing.*
 - *The emphasis must be on long-term, social housing.*
- ***Aboriginal control of aboriginal housing.***
 - *The approximately 2,000 off-reserve aboriginal housing units in Ontario fall well short of the need. Aboriginal people represent a disproportionately large number of homeless people. Any new supply must include a targeted component to create aboriginal housing under aboriginal control.*

- **Housing for northern communities.**
 - *Government statistics often ignore northern areas because the populations are below survey thresholds. Northern, rural and remote communities lack adequate funding for services and social housing. Income security issues are particularly important in Northern Ontario. Access to government services, including the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal, is severely limited.*

- **Adequate standard of living.**
 - *All Ontarians have the right to an adequate standard of living. This includes the right to a decent wage. Those who are unable to work have the right to adequate support, including social assistance and other income assistance programs. The government must implement a minimum annual income for all Ontarians reflecting the real cost of housing, food and other necessities.*

- **End discrimination in housing.**
 - *Access to good quality affordable housing is a basic human right. Cornerstones of the right to housing are economic security and the right to secure tenure. The Ontario Human Rights Code and principles of non-discrimination and equality must be upheld in the provision of all types of housing.*

- **Effective rent control and tenant protection.**
 - *The new system of rent regulation introduced in 1998 failed to protect tenants.*
 - *Rent increases in recent years increased at more than double the rate of inflation.*
 - *Annual average increases have been above the rent control guideline.*
 - *Full rent controls must be re-established.*
 - *The Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal ordered 116,605 renter households to be evicted without a hearing since June of 1998.*
 - *The so-called Tenant Protection Act must be replaced with a law that actually protects tenants and provides for a fair process with proper notification and adequate timelines.*

- **Expand existing supply.**
 - *The Ontario government abolished the Rental Housing Protection Act in 1998. Since then, there has been a big increase in the demolition and conversion of affordable rental housing, leading to a net loss of rental stock in some communities.*
 - *Declining property standards and lack of effective enforcement in many communities led to substandard conditions in existing units. Despite netting hundreds of millions in rent increases annually, landlords failed to invest in maintaining rental buildings.*
 - *The government has attempted to sell social housing and reduce the level of rent-geared-to-income subsidies, which also threatens existing supply.*

- **Control utility rates and other costs.**
 - *Skyrocketing utility rates, including electricity, water and sewer charges, are creating serious financial distress for many tenants, forcing some from their homes.*
 - *The privatization of Ontario Hydro will inevitably bring cost increases and add to this burden.*
 - *Other costs, including growing child care fees, add to this misery.*

- **Provision of adequate funding.**
 - *Municipalities have been saddled with the cost of provincial social housing programs. Funding this and other income-support programs from property taxes is bad public policy. Senior levels of government should either resume funding these programs or provide municipalities with the appropriate taxing powers.*

- **Stop criminalizing the poor.**
 - *There are already too many homeless people crowded into the province's jails. There must be no more criminalizing of poor and homeless people that force more of them into jails. There must be a commitment to decrease current levels of imprisonment. Continued over-incarceration and unnecessary short-term sentencing creates more homelessness and wastes money that should be spent on affordable housing, social programs, prevention programs and alternatives to prison.*
 - *All correctional facilities must remain in, or be returned to, the public sector.*