

No Time to Waste:

Solutions to the housing emergency are paramount in the fight against COVID-19 and beyond

“Unprecedented” and “crisis” have become buzz words over the last nine months. We’re all tired of hearing them, but for those of us working in the housing and sheltering community during a global pandemic, these words hold meaning like never before. **We are in an acute housing crisis.** So many of us are without a safe place to stay or are living in abject fear of losing housing in the middle of a pandemic. This is no time to shy away from bold and brave solutions. In fact, peoples’ lives depend on it.

November 22nd marks the 20th anniversary of National Housing Day in Canada. It is difficult to imagine that organizers of the first event would have predicted that this day would be needed two decades later. **Yet, here we are, still striving to realize the most basic of human rights – dignity and housing –** for hundreds of thousands of people across our country and 500+ people in our own province.

Even before the pandemic, beds were full in **our non-profit sheltering and housing organizations.** We often had to turn as many people away as we were able to welcome in. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we adapted our protocols and physical spaces overnight. We reduced the number of beds in order to maintain physical distancing and increase safety for all who stay and work in shelters. This has come at a cost.

In Halifax, 500 people are currently homeless; three-quarters of them have been living without this basic right for six months or longer. In Halifax, there are 45 fewer beds available each night for men experiencing homelessness. Also included in the list are 93 women and 62 families – primarily led by single mothers – who don’t have a home. Across HRM, this translates to a shortage of 17,520 beds for people over the course of a year, where people have no safe place to be during a global pandemic.

Shelters are not ‘the solution’ to homelessness. Their purpose is to provide a temporary safe, emergency space until more permanent homes can be found. Sadly, the inventory of rental units in Halifax is almost non-existent, and rents are increasing at an unsustainable rate for many people currently housed and making housing completely unattainable for those experiencing homelessness. It is becoming impossible to find truly affordable and appropriate housing for the people we serve. It is soul destroying to have to tell someone that we have no safe space for them to sleep at night and little opportunity, if any, to find secure long-term solutions. Many people who live in the so-called “affordable housing” are residing in poor conditions (mould, rodents, bed bugs) in dilapidated buildings.

Properties are being purchased and renovated, with their tenants ‘renovicted’ at a staggering rate. Housing that is available is outrageously priced. Last week, a vacancy in Halifax listed for \$600 a month wasn’t an apartment or even a bedroom. The advertisement was for a hallway with no doors or windows and a mere curtain for privacy. **Is this what we’ve become as a city and a province?**

In late August, a group led by Eric Jonsson, a Halifax social worker, met with people they found living outside and talked with them about their situations. Of 35 people they spoke with the oldest was 79 and the youngest 21 years old. These brothers, mothers, grandfathers, friends, aunts and siblings reported sleeping on and under park benches, a bridge, a picnic table, in tents, cars and parking garages.

Just four per cent of Halifax's population identifies as Indigenous; that day in this group, 31 per cent were Indigenous. The overrepresentation of Indigenous and racially-visible persons, including people of African-descent, and those belonging to the 2SLGBTQ+ community who are experiencing homelessness is all too common. Homelessness is also about systemic exclusion and access to very basic resources.

We are all exhausted by the pandemic, but we are not all struggling to find a place to sleep each night. The toll that homelessness and insecure housing takes is immeasurable.

Last week, Premier Stephen McNeil said, "Clearly we need to do more around affordability and affordable housing, particularly in the (Halifax) core...Once we have the right public policy, we'll communicate it to you. We're still working on the solution." A few days later, he announced that the fall sitting of the House would only be in session long enough to be prorogued until February of next year.

We beseech the Premier, and our provincial government, to recognize that the housing emergency is in fact a key component to the COVID-19 solution, and has far reaching implications beyond the global pandemic. Good public health cannot be achieved until our most vulnerable citizens have safe housing. Without acting on housing for pandemic safety and prevention, we will be ineffective and continue to cause the most harm to people in our community experiencing homelessness or who are precariously housed. This inequitably includes high percentages of people who are Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, women, youth, 2SLGBTQ+, the elderly, people with mental and physical disabilities.

We have no more time. Policy development is delaying response. Within the non-profit community, there is well-designed policy, practice, experience and expertise around the issues, from emergency shelter to long-term, permanent housing. We know how to create solutions, but we need our governmental counterparts working with us in partnership, supplying resources and flexibility to get the work done. There is not one solution. We need to build, buy, retrofit, supplement rents, resource more shelter beds and more, to get ourselves out of this emergency. **We must do it all now. It is a matter of life and death.**

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