



Housing and Homelessness

Canada requires more supportive housing options for people with serious mental illness, as well as affordable housing units for low-income earners. It is estimated that 200,000 Canadians are homeless and 1.7 million families are in core housing need*. Adequate housing is a basic requirement for the maintenance of health.

SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

Regarding the need for housing for persons with serious mental illness:

- The closure of tens of thousands of psychiatric treatment beds, before appropriate community-based services were developed, placed people with serious mental illness at greater risk for homelessness.
- It is estimated that 1/3 of the homeless population experience some form of mental illness. This number increases to 75% for homeless single women.
- A significant proportion of homeless people with mental illness will also have a substance abuse problem.
- Increasing numbers of people with serious mental illness are residing in correctional facilities.

In general:

- Research supports a strong, positive link between housing stability and positive mental health.
- Average rents in urban settings are becoming increasingly unaffordable for low-income Canadians. Poverty and housing tenure are closely connected.
- In Toronto, as of August 2002, there were 16,000 families and 31,000 children on official waiting lists for affordable housing. Over 1/3 had monthly incomes under \$800.

FEDERAL ACTION

The National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) was a three-year, multi-partnered program that included the Departments of National Defense, Health Canada, Indian & Northern Affairs, Citizenship and Immigration, Justice Canada and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Though the NHI officially ended as of March 31, 2003, components such as the Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) has been extended.

Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI)

In the recent federal budget, SCPI, the centerpiece of the national housing initiative, has been extended with funding of \$405 million to 61 communities over three years. SCPI is a flexible program that can be relevant to many, including youth and aboriginal communities. SCPI funding is available on a shared basis with a 50% matching requirement (cash or in-kind) from a range of non-federal sources.

SCPI is designed to support local, community-based efforts to identify priorities, plan and develop appropriate solutions including the development of: shelter facilities such as hostels; support facilities such as food banks, clothing and furniture depots etc.; support services such as counseling, health teaching and life skills training etc.; community planning and coordination, and capacity building activities and public awareness initiatives focused on homelessness.

Canadian Mortgage & Housing Corporation supports a broad range of housing programs, research and services, including:

Affordable Housing Initiative

The federal government has negotiated with the provinces and territories to implement this program, designed, delivered and co-funded by the jurisdictions, to stimulate production of affordable housing. Starting last year, the Government of Canada is offering \$680 million over 5 years; the 2003 budget included an additional \$320 million over five years. Provinces must match the amount of federal funding 50:50.

Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP)

RRAP is targeted at improving the condition of rental housing for low-income tenants by converting non-residential buildings into affordable housing, developing affordable rental accommodation and bringing existing housing stock up to health and safety standards. RRAP also received new funding in this year's budget - \$128 million per year over three years.

Shelter Enhancement Program (SEP)

SEP assists in repairing, rehabilitating and improving existing shelters for women, children and youth who are victims of family violence and in acquiring or building new shelters and second-stage housing where needed.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE

- The housing components in this year's federal budget are seen as crucial steps in the right direction.
- The Affordable Housing Initiative, RRAP and SCPI comprise three essential pillars in housing policy, according to the Caledon Institute.
- However, critics contend that funding levels fall short. For example, the commitment of \$320 million over 5 years for new affordable housing amounts to just \$64 million annually, which will create only 2,400 additional units of housing per year.

Proposals for change include:

The *One Percent Solution Campaign* is based on the premise that in the mid-1990s, each level of government spent approximately 1% of their budgets on housing. Since then, there have been budget cuts. The "One Percent Solution" calls on governments to restore their spending on housing.

The *National Housing & Homeless Network* proposes a national housing program with 5 main components:

- Supply (increase the new social housing supply)
- Affordability (provide rent supplements for low-income households in new and existing social units)
- Supports (expand additional supportive housing units)
- Rehabilitation (acquire and convert substandard units to social housing)
- Emergency relief (double annual spending on services and shelters for the homeless)

Specifically, in regards to housing for persons with serious mental illness, a discussion paper prepared by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto further stresses the importance of the need to:

- provide supports that are consistent with rehabilitation principles and best practices, and
- provide housing that offers supports that are portable and recognizes people's tenancy rights.

**"Core housing need" means that housing is lacking in terms of number of bedrooms per family size, safety of the dwelling or payment of more than 30% of household income on accommodation. (Caledon Institute, The 2003 Budget: Political Legacy Needs Policy Architecture, February 2003.)*

Sources

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