



The Alliance to End Homelessness

www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca

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Ontario Human Rights Commission: A Proactive Role to End Homelessness

The Alliance to End Homelessness in Ottawa
Submission to the
Ontario Human Rights Commission
Consultation on Human Rights and Rental Housing
in Ontario
August 30, 2007

Contact: Lynne Browne, Coordinator, The Alliance to End Homelessness,
613-241-7913 x 205, lbrowne@ysb.on.ca,
147 Besserer Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6A7

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Submission from The Alliance to End Homelessness in Ottawa to the
Ontario Human Rights Commission Consultation on
Human Rights and Rental Housing in Ontario, August 30, 2007

The Alliance to End Homelessness welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) consultation on Human Rights and Rental Housing in Ontario that relates specifically to its new role and mission. Our recommendation addresses the role the Commission can play in protecting and promoting social and economic rights. Specifically, we are encouraged that the Commission has demonstrated its concern about the crisis of homelessness in our province and has solicited submissions on how best to address, with the power of the government of Ontario, issues of discrimination related to socio-economic status, poverty and homelessness.

The Alliance to End Homelessness urges the Ontario Human Rights Commission to proactively help to end homelessness in Ontario by undertaking an inquiry into and a review of Ontario's policies and legislation affecting low incomes. We believe current legislation to be inconsistent with the intent of the *Code*.

Whether inadequate incomes are derived from minimum wage or social assistance or disability benefit levels, the current rates ignore well documented evidence that homelessness is being created by legislation when rates ignore the costs of rent in our province and the very limited stock of affordable housing.

The Alliance to End Homelessness in Ottawa

The Alliance to End Homelessness is a coalition of 73 health, social service and housing agencies in Ottawa that has been in place for twelve years. The partners in The Alliance to End Homelessness are committed to working collaboratively to end homelessness by gaining and promoting a better understanding of homelessness and advocating for strategies to end it. Our partners work in collaboration with each other and in collaboration with municipal, provincial, and federal governments.

Despite twelve challenging years of effort, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Ottawa is increasing. Service agencies and concerned community members continue to help individuals and families who become homeless in Ottawa successfully move from emergency shelters into housing.

Unfortunately, since 2004, the percentage of people in our city who need to use an emergency shelter has increased by 4% to 9,010 individuals.

We are very mindful that in addition to those who had to stay in an emergency shelter, there were 9,143 households (*versus individuals*) at risk of losing their housing who were helped through a combination of federal, provincial and municipal funding that support Ottawa's "housing loss prevention" work. (1,773 of these households were within one month of losing their homes).

We have concluded that policy makers still need to do their part for progress to occur. OHRC can play a powerful role in helping that to happen. The missing pieces are significant actions to improve low income levels and to create affordable and appropriate housing. It is well past the time for changes to policies on income and housing that play a significant role in people becoming homeless in spite of community-based efforts and successes in assisting them.

Homeless people cannot afford permanent and safe housing

In our experience, the policies of provincial, federal and municipal governments play the significant role in the complex and enduring causes of homelessness in Ottawa and elsewhere. Individuals, families, including seniors who are homeless or who are at risk of becoming homeless cannot afford to live in existing affordable and appropriate housing given the rates set for income benefits and the levels of minimum or low wages.

Ontario Human Rights Commission New Role

We are very pleased that under the new Act, the role of the OHRC in preventing discrimination and promoting and advancing human rights in Ontario will be strengthened. In particular we recognize the importance of the OHRC's very broad powers to review legislation and policies.

The ability to act proactively with broad inquiry authority and the ability to consider whether legislation is inconsistent with the intent of the *Code* will make a significant difference, we believe, to the lives of those individuals and families experiencing low social and economic status and especially to those families, youth, women and men who become homeless in Ontario.

This proactive approach is very important. Our members believe that it is unavoidably ineffective if human rights appeals require that individual homeless or at risk persons initiate them nor is it realistic that agencies helping homeless people take on this role as they are all under resourced and of necessity focused on service delivery.

Of course, there is a federal role in helping to end homelessness. A national Housing Program through a new federal Department of Housing is needed, one that would include direct and significant increases in affordable housing and supportive and supported housing.

Federal rates and policies affecting low incomes also need to be improved. A Federal Minimum Wage rate at \$10.00 should be re-established. Increases to the rates and access to Employment Insurance (EI), investments in training, and increased in the Old Age Security (OAS) and the Guaranteed Income Support (GIS) programs need to be in line with the actual cost of living and staying housed in Canada.

There is also a need to structure the federal tax system to ensure that people on social assistance do not have benefits clawed back by provincial governments which is currently the case in Ontario with the child tax benefits and GST credits.

Income and rental housing realities in the Province of Ontario

The Alliance to End Homelessness agrees wholeheartedly with OHRC that "adequate and affordable housing is a human rights issue – we all need a decent place to live". We are proud that both the right to housing, which is internationally recognized, as well, and the right to housing free from discrimination is protected in Ontario's Human Rights Code.

As is often the case, the problem and the challenges lie in enforcing these rights both on a legislative and community level.

Our members do find that although discrimination in housing accommodation is not allowed under the Code, it is definitely a concern to homeless people. We are pleased with the Commissions clear statements that poverty is “linked with inequality and is highly relevant to his or her housing situation. It will dictate the type of housing available, the likelihood he or she will get the housing that he or she is seeking and may contribute to his or her treatment as a tenant.”

As many others will no doubt address, rent increases on vacant units continues to exacerbate the affordability issue in Ontario. And we would encourage the Commission to examine this policy. While the Code may make “it hard to tackle all aspects of poverty and homelessness”, The Alliance to End Homelessness encourages, indeed urges, the Commission to explore and quickly act on all available avenues within its mandate under the Code.

Understanding homelessness

The Ottawa Experience

People are homeless when they are living on the street, staying overnight in temporary shelters, staying in places not meant for human habitation or moving continuously among temporary housing arrangements provided by strangers, friends or family (often called “couch surfing”). People are homeless for many reasons including fleeing abuse, losing a job, or having an income too low to stay in permanent and safe housing.

Families and individuals can lose their housing for any number of reasons: losing a job, having an income too low to stay in their homes or fleeing abuse. Added complications for some are problems associated with physical or mental health issues or substance use.

The Alliance to End Homelessness is tracking the number of individuals who had to stay in an emergency shelter to indicate the seriousness and scope of the crisis in Ottawa. Since 2004, we have produced three report cards to assess how our community is faring in ending homelessness.

Trends in shelter use, low incomes & affordable housing Ottawa 2004-2006¹

- Number of people using shelters rose by almost 4% between 2004 and 2006 (346)
 - In the latest year (2006), 35.6% of shelter users had more than one episode of homelessness
- Length of average stay in the 3 years declined by 10%
 - In 2006 housing support efforts, including provincially funded staff who helped 1,550 households move from emergency shelters to permanent housing, has likely contributed to the decline in the length of shelter stay.
- 9,143 households at risk of losing their housing helped in Ottawa in 2006
 - 6,774 households at risk of homelessness were helped with consolidated Province of Ontario and City of Ottawa funding
 - 1,773 of these households were within one month of losing their homes. 2,369 households were helped with National Homelessness Initiative funding, Supporting Communities Partnership Initiatives (SCPI).

¹ *Third Report Card on Ending Homelessness in Ottawa* (Jan-Dec 2006), The Alliance to End Homelessness. Download free at www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca.

The following table is from the **Third Report Card on Ending Homelessness in Ottawa (Jan-Dec 2006)** and clearly indicates the ongoing crisis created by a number of government policies.

Alliance to End Homelessness' Indicators & 2006 Grades

	2004	2005	2006
HOUSING C-			
Affordable Housing			
Pre-1995 social housing units (total stock)	22,400	22,400	22,400
Post-2000 affordable units (total stock) (i.e., Action Ottawa & NHI units)	509*	521*	760
Rent supplements (City of Ottawa & CMHA)	3,000	3,085	3,198
Supportive housing units (total stock)	500	669	806
Waiting Lists			
Households on social housing waiting list	10,500	9,914	10,055
Supportive housing waiting list	2,000	2,214	2,630
Housing Market Indicators			
Rental vacancy rate	3.9%	3.3%	2.3%
Average rent for a 1-bedroom apartment	\$771	\$762	\$774
INCOME C			
Ontario Works for a single person	\$520	\$536	\$548
ODSP Assistance for a Single Person	\$930	\$959	\$979
Average monthly # of Ontario Works cases	17,879	17,552	16,541
Minimum Wage	\$7.15	\$7.45	\$7.75
Increase in Consumer Price Index	1.8%	2.3%	1.1%
HOMELESSNESS D			
# of individuals in an emergency shelter	8,664	8,853	9,010
Single men	4,845	4,905	5,007
Single women	1,221	1,267	1,451
Youth	509	543	607
Families (children & adults)	631 (1,092 children + 997 adults)	668 (1,035 children + 1,103 adults)	615 (1,163 children + 782 adults)
# of times shelter beds were used	323,612	310,299	323,625
LENGTH OF SHELTER STAY B			
Average length of stay in shelters (days)	38	36.1	33.7
Single men	40	39.1	38.4
Single women	31	31.9	28.1
Youth	23	17.4	16.2
Families	45	36.7	30.9
<small>*The City of Ottawa method of calculation has changed: it was previously 429 in 2004 & 441 in 2005. SOURCES – Housing: City of Ottawa (National Homelessness Initiative) and CMHC Rental Market Survey. Income and Support Programs: Province of Ontario; Homelessness: Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), City of Ottawa.</small>			

In 2006

Overall environment did not improve

HOUSING

- The rental vacancy rate decreased to 2.3%, contributing to small increases in average rents. (A one bedroom apt. is now \$774.)
- There was a small increase in the number of affordable housing units available in the Ottawa area. Yet, the waiting list for social housing increased by 1.4% in 2006 to 10,055 households.
- The number of available supportive housing units increased. However, the waiting list for these units also increased.

INCOME

- Cost of living increases offset small income increases in Minimum Wage as well as increases in Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) benefits.
- Ontario Works for a single person is \$548 per month, the bachelor apt. average rent is \$633.

HOMELESSNESS

- The number of different individuals using emergency shelters in Ottawa increased by 1.8% to 9,010.
- The number of single women using shelters increased by 14.5%.
- The number of youth using shelters increased by 11.8%.
- The number of children using shelters increased by 12.4%, even though the number of families decreased by 7.9%.

Rental housing in Ottawa

Most people with low incomes in Ottawa rely on non-subsidized housing. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation has determined that the 2006 Average Market Rents in Ottawa are \$450 for a room, \$633 for a bachelor unit, \$774 for a one-bedroom unit, \$941 for a two-bedroom unit and \$1,146 for 3 or more bedrooms. There are 10,055 households on our social housing waiting list

The current minimum wage and OW or ODSP rates make it necessary for people to spend considerably more than 30% of their income on housing, keep many at risk of homelessness and in each of the last three years resulted in 1% of Ottawa's population becoming homeless.

Talking with homeless people in Ottawa: “The panel study on homelessness in Ottawa”²

Our community has been very fortunate to have access to information from homeless people themselves. It was gathered as part of the panel study which tracked the same homeless individuals (single adults, families, and youth) and spoke with them over time in two rounds of interviews.

The research involved speaking with 412 homeless individuals in 2002-03 and then re-interviewing 255 (62%) of them two years later in 2004-05.

The research was undertaken by the Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services at the University of Ottawa, Carleton University, and Saint Paul University in partnership with the Alliance to End Homelessness and the City of Ottawa with funding from the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council and the National Homelessness Initiative.

The final report findings include:

- Having a higher income and accessing subsidized housing emerged as key factors in predicting who was housed two years after having been homeless.
- For some, sharing accommodations for cost-saving purposes contributed to ongoing housing difficulties and even further homelessness.
- For others, living with roommates was a source of important social support that assisted them to keep their housing.
- Many respondents identified the assistance from community workers and organizations as important in helping them to become housed.
- For some, one key element provided by community services made all the difference helping them move into housing.
- For others, an appropriate on-going ‘basket’ of complementary services and supports was required for them to maintain their housing.
- Living in better quality housing in terms of comfort, privacy, and space was related to higher levels of mental health.
- Negative features about a neighbourhood or housing were cited by some respondents as reasons for leaving their housing and them becoming homeless again.

² Panel Study reports are available at the University of Ottawa, Centre for Educational and Community Services' website: <http://www.socialsciences.uottawa.ca/crcs/eng/projects.asp>

On the frontline of social service provision

Further evidence of the deepening crisis can be found in the April 2007 briefing summary report³ the Ottawa Integrated Drug Strategy Special Issue Subcommittee, prepared by members of The Alliance to End Homelessness who are Executive Directors of the Men's Emergency Shelters in Ottawa. The brief was prepared to outline the shelter issues experienced at the municipal level.

1. There is a “lack of an integrated Housing Policy that provides for a choice of a full range (continuum) of housing options, ranging from social housing to private market/private ownership, for all citizens . . . a policy needs to be supported and funded consistently across all jurisdictional boundaries (i.e. federal, provincial and municipal) . . . This lack of policy has resulted in a critical shortage of appropriate affordable housing thus not allowing for the large backlog of individuals staying in “emergency shelters” to move on. The end result is an emergency shelter system that is attempting to deal with multiple issues beyond the capacity for which it was intended. Not only is this the most expensive way to attempt to deal with housing it further creates a demand for additional non-traditional supports to be added for that system.”
2. There is a “lack of an integrated Mental Health and Addictions system that is adequately funded, appropriately designed for capacity, is easily accessed and provides for a choice of a full range (continuum) of interventions and services for all citizens. *The lack of such integration, funding and appropriateness of design has resulted in a backlog of individuals with mental health and addictions issues into the emergency shelter system. The end result is an emergency shelter system that is attempting to deal with multiple issues beyond the capacity for which it was intended.*”
3. There is a “lack of appropriate income and employment supports for individuals attempting to move from the emergency shelter system. . . The current income level for the social welfare system has fallen dramatically behind due to implementation of previous governmental policy. As a result, individuals moving out of the shelter system are, in the City of Ottawa, spending as much as 70% of their monthly income on existing housing that is available. Even at those rates much of this housing is far from appropriate for individuals trying to move forward with independent living. Many are forced to rely on food banks and even panhandling to survive while they attempt to find employment.”

Conclusion

Beyond doubt, action is needed, but in the competing environment of the various provincial ministries where policy changes would seem to be in rival silos, we see little that could bring about immediate improvements in ending homelessness. The current situation may be inadvertent, but the homelessness crisis requires that incomes are more in line with housing costs.

The Alliance to End Homelessness believes current legislation affecting low incomes to be inconsistent with the intent of the Human Rights Code and recommends that the Commission proactively contribute to ending homelessness in Ontario by undertaking an inquiry into and a review of Ontario's policies and legislation affecting low incomes.

³ *Impact of changing policy from those on the frontline of social service provision*, Briefing summary prepared for the Ottawa Integrated Drug Strategy Special Issue Subcommittee by the Shelter Executive Director's Network. April 2007.

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