

## Addressing Homelessness in Canada

Chronic homelessness and poverty is an issue for all levels of government and businesses across Canada.

A 2008 study for the Ontario Association of Food Banks authored by Don Drummond and other leading economists notes that not addressing the root causes of poverty costs approximately \$13.1 billion annually. The study indicates that due to the persistence of this condition, all residents of Ontario pay through increased expenditures for healthcare, housing, crime and social assistance and in the loss of tax revenue that accompanies low earnings.

The 2013 federal budget included three specific measures related to housing and homelessness<sup>1</sup>) \$119 million per year over five years for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), 2) \$253 million per year over five years to renew the Investment in Affordable Housing, and 3) \$100 million over two years to support the construction of housing in Nunavut.

The Homelessness Partnership Strategy will utilize a “Housing First” approach which aims to move homeless people rapidly from shelters and the streets into stable housing, while providing them with the necessary support for underlying mental health or additional issues to stabilize their lives. The HPS will seek to address homelessness by working in partnership with communities, provincial and territorial governments, and the private and non-profit sectors.

An editorial in the Toronto Star on April 30, 2013 noted that the recent federal budget marked a significant change in the way homelessness is tackled in this country.<sup>1</sup> Authors Sam Tsemberis and Vicky Stergiopoulos claimed the commitment to *Housing First* will dramatically shift the focus in Canadian housing policy from “helping the homeless” to “ending homelessness.”

In the U.S., *Housing First* programs have been shown to effectively end homelessness by providing immediate access to housing and support services and then providing required treatments. Previously, individuals were required to meet milestones, such as mental health counseling, just to be eligible for housing.

The 2012 report *All Roads Lead to Home: The Homelessness to Housing Stability Strategy for Waterloo Region* compiled by Regional Municipality of Waterloo Social Services noted that all orders of government, businesses, not-for-profit groups and residents have a role to play in ending homelessness.

To achieve housing stability, three key resources are necessary – adequate housing, income and support. The primary goal of the strategy is to end homelessness through a shared approach where all community stakeholders work collaboratively.

In late May of 2013, the national Big City Mayors’ Caucus (BCMC) called on provincial, territorial and federal governments to confront the growing housing crisis across the country. The BCMC proposed a new housing partnership by all orders of government dedicated to, among other components, eliminating chronic homelessness through proven strategies, stimulating new rental/affordable housing construction with tax incentives and other measures, and preserving and renovating existing social housing units.

Media reports in May 2013 noted that Calgary and Waterloo Region have more than 3,000 families on lists for affordable housing, while province-wide Ontario has 150,000 waiting. Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson noted the fiscal pressures are particularly intense in Ontario where housing is a municipal responsibility whereas the portfolio is provincially regulated across the remainder of Canada. Like other infrastructure, current affordable and social housing units at 40 to 50 years are reaching the end of their shelf life.

<sup>1</sup> How the federal government plans to end homelessness. Sam Tsemberis and Vicky Stergiopoulos. Toronto Star, April 30, 2013.

Kitchener Mayor Carl Zehr indicated that waiting lists for housing are getting longer in Waterloo Region due to an increasing population and an insufficient volume of new housing going on the market.

Canada's housing crisis is too large and complex for any single order of government to address unilaterally, given the thousands of builders, investors and community partners working within a myriad of federal, provincial and local regulations. A coordinated approach is, therefore, an imperative.

### **Recommendations**

That the federal government:

1. Maintain the "Housing First" approach of creating and sustaining affordable and supportive housing as a first priority in the development of a national strategy.
2. Coordinate efforts with the provinces/territories and municipalities to stimulate new affordable housing construction.