

Member Organizations

Alliance to End Homelessness, Ottawa

Action-Logement / Action-Housing
Bruce House
Canadian Mental Health Association –
Ottawa
Carlington Community Health Centre
Catholic Immigration Centre
Centre 454
Centre 507 Drop-In
Centre des services communautaires
/Vanier Community Service Centre
Centre for Research on Educational and
Community Services, University of
Ottawa
Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation
Centretown Community Health Centre
City of Ottawa, Housing Services Branch
Community Legal Services Ottawa
Centre
Cooperative Housing Association of
Eastern Ontario
Cornerstone Housing for Women/Le Piliier
Daybreak Non-Profit Shelter
Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa
Gloucester Housing Corporation
Housing Help
John Howard Society of Ottawa
Lowertown Community Resource Centre
Minwaashin Lodge/Oshki Kizis Healing
Lodge
Montfort Renaissance
Multifaith Housing Initiative
Nepean, Rideau, Osgoode Community
Resource Centre
Operation Come Home
Options Bytown Non-Profit Housing
Corporation
Ottawa Community Housing Corporation
Ottawa Inner City Health Inc.
Ottawa Inner City Ministries
Ottawa Pastoral Counselling Centre
Ottawa Salus Corporation
Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health
Centre
Royal Ottawa Health Care Group
Sandy Hill Community Health Centre
Shepherds of Good Hope
Somerset West Community Health
Centre
South-East Ottawa Community Health
Centre
St. Joe's Women's Centre
St. Luke's Lunch Club
The Ottawa Mission
The Salvation Army Ottawa Booth Centre
The Well/La Source
Tungasuvvingat Inuit
Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health
Western Ottawa Community Resource
Centre
Wigwamen Incorporated
YMCA-YWCA, National Capital Region
Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa



Deputation to:

Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

by Mike Bulthuis, Executive Director
Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa
January 22, 2016

Introduction

The Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa is a non-partisan, non-profit organization working in partnership in Ottawa to inspire local action, to generate knowledge and to inform our community-wide effort to achieve an end to homelessness in our community. We represent over 50 Ottawa-based service providing organizations working to strengthen residents' housing outcomes.

We are driven by a vision of an inclusive community, where everyone has an affordable, appropriate home. And we believe that every sector in our community – including governments and the private sector – can do more to help us achieve that vision.

We believe that the Province of Ontario shares our vision, too. Early in 2015, the provincial government appointed the Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness, which in October released its final report and recommendations: *A Place to Call Home*. The Panel, in its recommendations, calls for 'progressive action,' centred around the government's earlier commitment – expressed as part of the Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy – to end chronic homelessness in Ontario within ten years.

We know that ending homelessness is good for our vulnerable neighbours – so all can reach their potential – while also supporting strong communities and a strong province.

In response to the Panel's report, we applaud the \$10 million commitment over 2 years in targeted funding from the Local Poverty Reduction Fund, pursuing innovative approaches to help prevent and end homelessness across the province. In Ottawa,

with initiatives like Broadening the Base – a collaborative table, bringing together developers, land holders, philanthropists, ourselves and others, to develop innovative solutions to address our shortage in affordable housing – we recognize that new approaches are needed. However, the provincial response needs to go further. Yes, while additional provincial data may be needed on some aspects of homelessness – we echo the Panel’s call for “immediate action – a down payment – to demonstrate the commitment to ending homelessness” (*A Place to Call Home*, p 47).

We also do applaud the government’s concurrence with the Panel – not only in its bold commitment to ending chronic homelessness in Ontario within ten years – but in choosing to prioritize provincial action to reduce homelessness in four areas: youth, Aboriginal and chronic homelessness, and in homelessness following transitions from provincially-funded institutions and service systems, such as jails and hospitals.

In this submission, we outline two key policy areas below that will enhance housing outcomes across vulnerable populations – (1) a strong Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy and (2) meaningful increases to social assistance rates. In section (3), we offer support for addressing four priority populations, and in section (4) note several additional low-cost and no-cost approaches to enhancing housing outcomes.

(1) Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy

We encourage the Province to seize a significant opportunity this Spring, and in the coming years, to make progress vis-à-vis these four populations – and indeed for all Ontarians - with significant budget support for the next phase of the province’s Long-Term-Affordable Housing Strategy. Enhancing the province’s availability of affordable housing through long-term and stable funding must be seen as core to any strategy to ending homelessness within the province.

We have work to do.

Here in Ottawa, as across the province, the demand for affordable housing options continues to grow. The Alliance annually publishes a Progress Report on Ending Homelessness. In our latest edition, published in June 2015, and representing data for the 2014 calendar year, we found

- 6,520 different individuals stayed in an emergency shelter at some point during the year, representing an average length of stay of 77 days – an increase from 73 days in 2013 – pointing to an acute shortage of affordable housing options.
- Over 900 of these individuals were youth between the ages of 16-25
- Over 1/5 of those who used an emergency shelter were 17 or younger – children staying with their families in family emergency shelters.

- Over 500 individuals were chronically or episodically homeless, staying in homeless shelters for 6 months or more, or having experienced three or more episodes of homelessness within the calendar year.
- Affordability challenges run deep, too. At the end of 2014, a total of 10,224 active households were on our community's Centralized Waiting List for subsidized housing – many with complex and challenging needs that stretch the resources of housing providers.

Challenges exist beyond the shelter system, as well. As noted within *A Place to Call Home*, the majority of people experiencing homelessness are not counted within this shelter data. Many others are hidden – staying on couches, with friends or family. Many of these, too, struggle with homelessness for long periods of time. In fact, in a survey undertaken in Ottawa in April, 2015, as part of Ottawa's Registry Week and participation in the national 20,000 Homes campaign, we found that 63% of youth surveyed on one day – many who were among the hidden homeless, outside of our shelter system – reported having been homeless for six months or more. Along with young people, women, families and our Aboriginal community may in fact be disproportionately present among the hidden homeless. *Our homelessness challenges go far beyond our shelter system.*

These facts all point to a troubling shortage – a crisis – of affordable housing. As part of Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy, we urge the government to:

- grow the Investment in Affordable Housing program, to invest in a range of housing options, including purpose-built non-profit rental housing, supportive housing, supported housing, rent supplements and housing benefits, and short stay crisis safe beds for vulnerable populations.
- ensure that funding is available for the capital repair, rehabilitation and renovation of social housing across Ottawa and across the Province. We understand that across Ontario, non-profit and co-operative housing providers face an estimated \$2.6 billion in outstanding capital repairs.
- in response to any federal social infrastructure program, continue to match federal funding for affordable housing – capitalizing on an opportunity for enhanced inter-governmental cooperation and progressive action.

(2) Meaningful increases to Social Assistance

With a shortage of affordable housing, thousands of Ottawa and Ontario households desperately struggle month to month in affording both rent and the costs of other basic needs like transportation, clothing and food (which we know is rising fast). Recognizing the long wait times for affordable housing – an average five-year wait in Ottawa - we call for enhanced social assistance and housing benefits for households in need. The need is clear:

- According to the Canadian Rental Housing Index, drawing on Statistics Canada census data, released in September 2015, nearly one in five (19%) renter households in Ottawa are spending more than 50 per cent of their gross income on rent and utilities – representing just under 22,000 households in Ottawa alone - putting them at a crisis level of spending.
- According to the Ontario Association of Food Banks, in their 2015 Hunger Report, the average food bank client in Ontario spends over 70% of their income on housing, which puts them at a dangerously high risk of homelessness.

The Alliance has been tracking housing affordability for over ten years. Based on both actual housing costs and the amount of social assistance recipients earn, we know that in Ottawa, in 2014, a single individual receiving Ontario Works (OW) would require 119% of their monthly receipt to afford average market rent on a bachelor apartment. An individual receiving Ontario Disability Support (ODSP) would require 71% of their monthly receipt.

A modest \$25 top-up for single adults, enacted on October 30, 2015, raised the monthly allocation for a single individual from \$656 to \$681. This amount – in its entirety (intended to cover shelter and basic needs) – is still far less than the average market rent for a bachelor apartment. It's clear: over many years, social assistance rates have not increased with inflation or the cost of living.

In fact, even for those working full time and earning minimum wage, over 40% of their monthly revenue would be needed to afford average market rent – far higher than the recommended 30% that we spend on housing – in order to afford other basic needs.

In summary, we strongly encourage the Province to enact meaningful increases to social assistance, including within the Budget the following measures:

- address the basic income levels of Ontario residents receiving Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support so that they have the ability to afford safe and stable accommodations, and are not left paying in excess of 30% of their income on housing.
- establish a goal that would lead us to a Guaranteed Annual Income by 2020.
- further increase the Ontario minimum wage to ensure it is a living wage.

(3) Priority Populations for Action

Again, we are pleased to see four priority populations identified by the Province in its response to the Expert Panel's October 2015 report, including: youth, Aboriginal and chronic homelessness, and in homelessness following transitions from provincially-funded institutions and service systems, such as jails and hospitals. A number of early recommendations are as follows.

Youth homelessness: As confirmed within the Poverty Reduction Strategy as well, youth require a unique response. In Ottawa, we are thrilled to be in the early stages of convening community partners and young people themselves in the development of a plan to prevent and end youth homelessness in Ottawa, known as A Way Home Ottawa. In the Province’s response to the October 2015 Panel report, we are keen to see the commitment to Youth Labs, ‘collaborative, action-oriented conversations on issues raised in the panel’s report.’ In fact, we recently received inquiries from 75 young people – the majority with lived experience of homelessness – to participate on our initiative’s youth leadership team. In light of these developments and government commitments, we urge:

- investment in affordable and transitional housing accommodations specific to youth, following housing first for youth principles, recognizing the importance of both housing and support services as core components of a strategy to improve a vulnerable young person’s path to adulthood and accompanying independence.
- adoption of a government-wide positive youth development framework to guide the work of preventing and ending youth homelessness, investing in education and employment opportunities for youth, alongside housing and supports. Here, we echo the Panel, believing that “interventions will need to be coordinated, involving education, employment, housing, mental health services and supports, and mentorship.”

Aboriginal homelessness: The First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities are over-represented within our local homelessness population, with estimates that at least 30% of Ottawa’s homeless population self-identifies with these identities – a far higher proportion than their presence within the population overall. In response to the disproportionate impact of homelessness as it affects these communities, we urge:

- enhanced resources and investments, including in affordable housing and culturally sensitive approaches within health, corrections, mental health and child welfare.
- support for enhanced, culturally competent research efforts to understand the breadth and scope of housing and homelessness challenges among our Aboriginal community.
- continuous dialogue between provincial officials and local Aboriginal stakeholders to better identify needed resources and investments.

Chronic homelessness: It has been identified that 12% of individuals accessing Ottawa’s shelter system between 2004-2007 were doing so repeatedly or for long periods (many for years), consuming 52% of shelter bed spaces.¹ These individuals, frequently

¹ Tim Aubry, Susan Farrell, Stephen W. Hwang & Melissa Calhoun (2013) “Identifying the Patterns of Emergency Shelter Stays of Single Individuals in Canadian Cities of Different Sizes” *Housing Studies* 28 (6), pp. 910-927.

considered to be among those who are chronically or episodically homeless, need immediate housing solutions. In 2014, 439 adult single individuals in Ottawa were sheltered for six months or more within the calendar year, while 98 family households remained in shelters for six months or more – before permanent affordable housing options became available. For kids – for anyone – this is unacceptable. In Ottawa, the shortage of affordable housing – either in the form of subsidized units or made affordable via housing subsidies – remains a significant barrier to further implementation of housing first responses.

In support of the province’s commitment to ending chronic homelessness, we urge:

- investments in permanent affordable and supportive housing for individuals and families exiting a period of chronic homelessness.
- enhanced investments for ongoing support services, both mobile and in social housing communities, to enable successful tenancies.
- attention - as part of the provincial review of social assistance - to the structure of the monthly Basic Needs Allowance, and the weekly Personal Needs Allowance it replaced. One challenge that has been identified with the current system is that there is a financial disincentive for some individuals to leave the shelter system. Ensuring the supports are available to assist individuals with financial planning, including transitioning with finances, to ensure that the focus is on longer term positive outcomes for individuals is key.
- resources to provide the social support programs that are critical to supporting and keeping the more vulnerable healthy and housed – addressing ‘the poverty of loneliness.’ Community spaces for social connection and belonging, and for strengthening community integration, are critical. These spaces and centres play an important role in facilitating housing stability.

Related to the last point, attention to permanent housing solutions for those experiencing chronic homelessness must not result in reductions to primary prevention and early intervention programming such as housing loss prevention.

Homelessness following transitions from provincially-funded institutions and service systems, such as jails and hospitals: We are pleased to see this priority population, agreeing that individuals within these systems need to be supported to ensure they are not discharged into (or back into) homelessness after their care, treatment, or incarceration is complete. Specifically, we encourage:

- an increased investment and flexibility in targeted housing support as part of post-discharge planning, and in community-based mental health and addictions support services, post-incarceration support, and support for those exiting foster care.
- resources and programming to be made available to address the needs of the dual diagnosed who are currently waiting long times in institutional settings for appropriate housing options.

- a review and updating of current mandates in addiction, mental health and other programs so that intake criteria reflect current provincial policies and directions. For example, in some provincially funded programs, criteria for access may be based on factors that were relevant many years ago, but are less relevant today (e.g., having spent a minimum number of days in hospital to access Assertive Community Treatment teams). It is important to review these kinds of program standards/criteria and update them so that they align with current health policy as it relates to inpatient care.

(4) Additional no-cost and low-cost approaches

There are, of course, also no-cost and low-cost mechanisms that can be taken to improve housing outcomes for even more residents of Ontario. We are pleased to see within the mandate for Municipal Affairs and Housing attention to reviewing how planning tools can enhance affordable housing outcomes – drawing attention to the possibilities of inclusionary zoning, among others. Here in Ottawa, discussions are underway to bring together developers, non-profits and communities to further these discussions. We recommend that Ontario:

- deliver legislation that ensures affordable housing is included as a requirement in new housing developments. One initial step could be to strengthen tools such as Section 37 of the *Planning Act* to facilitate greater transparency and predictability.
- leverage surplus provincial government land to build housing, removing one of the largest financial barriers to affordable housing development.

Closing

We thank you for your commitments to-date – to poverty reduction, to ending homelessness, to a long-term affordable housing strategy, and to improving social assistance. We look forward to further concrete actions – in the 2016 Budget and in future initiatives - to deliver on these priorities. We know that investing in people and their housing outcomes is good not only for those who may today be vulnerable; these investments are good for our communities, our economy and our entire Province.

January, 2016