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HOMELESSNESS A CRITICAL ISSUE

By The Right Reverend John H. Chapman, Anglican Bishop of Ottawa

Ontario residents go to the polls on June 07, 2018 to elect a Provincial Government. When they enter that polling booth, many will be thinking about what this election means to them and their families. Parents may be concerned about education and child care. As a taxpayer, thoughts may run to deficits and budgets. Homeowners may, understandably, worry about rising fuel bills. Or, if a voter or someone close is ill, worries may be with hospital wait times, pharmaceutical costs, or shortages of family physicians. All these concerns are justified.

Yet this year, when voters go to the polls, which I strongly urge them to do, I ask them to consider as well the most vulnerable in our society, the poor and the homeless. "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute" (Proverbs 31:8).

Ottawa, like most major cities in Ontario, is facing a crisis of homelessness. Despite having a ten-year Housing and Homelessness Plan, last year the city saw a 5% increase in the number of people requiring emergency shelter. The largest increase in homelessness was among families with children, who now account for over half of the bed nights used in Ottawa's shelters. This crisis is fuelled by severe shortages of affordable housing, extreme poverty for people with minimum wage jobs or on social assistance, inadequate funding for mental health and addiction treatment, and a failure to focus on early intervention and prevention of homelessness.

The Anglican Church operates several affordable housing communities, drop-in day programs, an emergency downtown women's shelter, and counselling services through our Community Ministries. Whether it is someone struggling with mental illness or fleeing abuse, someone needing a short-term hand or on-going support, someone needing help to feed themselves or their family, or perhaps just needing a listening ear, we are there. The Community Ministries of Ottawa provide the easy welcome and the opportunity to access a network of practical help available for the people who walk through our doors. Together, we are pushing back despair and supporting each success—large or small—one step at a time.

We are committed to continuing this support. In addition, as we prepare to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Diocese of Ottawa in 2021, our goal is to provide 125 new units of affordable housing. Yet, we cannot resolve the issues of poverty and homelessness alone. They require major support from all levels of government.

The federal government has begun to implement a National Housing Strategy that provides a range of measures to expand affordable housing and reduce homelessness. They require the support and cooperation of provincial and municipal government to be fully effective.

For the next Ontario government we look for:

- Implementation in the province of a National Housing Benefit in addition to, not in place of, existing provincial programs;
- Cooperation with the federal government to develop a renewed, expanded Homelessness Partnering Strategy by the target date in just one year;
- Adequate funding by the province of mental health and addiction services.

In advance of the election, I urge Ottawa voters to discuss the issue of homelessness and affordable housing with their candidates. I hope they will ask them what they and their party would do to support those vulnerable residents served by the Community Ministries and other key non-profit agencies in the city. I hope they will talk with their friends and neighbours, relatives and co-workers.