

OTTAWA, ON (July, 2018)

MUNICIPAL ISSUES

Homelessness and Affordable Housing: A Municipal Responsibility

The Alliance to End Homelessness reported recently¹ that, despite ongoing investments and an emphasis on reducing chronic homelessness from 2014 to 2017, shelter use in Ottawa increased by 16%. Family homelessness has increased the most, rising 33% in that same time period. Families with children increasingly are being “housed” in one room of a former school or motel while they wait for permanent affordable housing to be available.

The Anglican Diocese of Ottawa is profoundly concerned with the lack of progress in preventing and ending homelessness. While the Community Ministries² of the Diocese provide support for the most vulnerable in our community, the church cannot resolve the issues of poverty and homelessness alone. We call for municipal leadership in this most critical area to create a sound and vibrant community and a welcoming, safe environment for all residents.

For the past twenty years, responsibility for homelessness and affordable housing has fallen to municipal governments in Ontario. Devolution of social housing from the provincial government to local government occurred in the late 1990s, followed by the federal government’s designation of “community entities” for the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. The City of Ottawa is the designated service manager responsible for social and affordable housing, as well as the community entity for homelessness and the City must assume strong leadership in dealing with increasing numbers of homeless families and individuals.

The Community Ministries call for two major series of actions:

- A Robust Strategy to Prevent Homelessness; and
- A Complete Array of Safe, Suitable and Affordable Housing Options

A Robust Strategy to Prevent Homelessness

The paths to homelessness are complex and varied, but there are key factors that increase the risk of a family or individual becoming homeless. The lack of affordable housing, poverty, mental illness and substance abuse, abusive relationships, and transitions out of institutionalized care (health care, criminal justice, and child welfare systems for example) all can lead to a greater likelihood of homelessness.

Solutions for homelessness must be broad-based, but the Community Ministries call for an increased focus on prevention in particular. Across Canada, many communities are making investments in preventing and reducing levels of homelessness, rather than in solely relying on emergency services as a “crisis response.”

Using public health as an analogy gives a useful framework for how to prevent homelessness. In the same way that a health system would not focus only on Emergency Rooms, nor should emergency shelters be the mainstay of what is provided for the homeless. Just as we introduced legislation on seat belts, tobacco use, healthy eating and nutrition as health prevention measures, so too do we need comparable preventive programs to resolve homelessness.

¹ Homelessness in Ottawa: A Roadmap for Change, Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa, June 2018

² Cornerstone Housing for Women, Centre 454, The Well, St. Luke’s Table and the Ottawa Pastoral Counselling Centre.

Primary prevention aims to reduce the risk of homelessness for the entire population and also includes targeted interventions for at-risk communities. Specific steps the City can take to engage in primary prevention include:

- Creating more affordable housing in all neighbourhoods of Ottawa (see our recommendations below).
- Increasing access to affordable child care, providing low-income families increased opportunities to work and freeing up more of their incomes to pay for housing.
- Introducing school-based education and early intervention services for at-risk or homeless youth.³
- Offering support for those facing discrimination in accessing public and private services, including for newcomers and indigenous people.
- Ensuring resources are available to community agencies so they can readily assist with applications for ODSP and other poverty reduction programs.

Secondary prevention involves identifying and addressing homelessness at an early stage and directing interventions to individuals at risk. The goal is to either avoid homelessness by assisting people to retain their housing, or to exit homelessness by using rapid rehousing strategies. The City should pursue the following initiatives:

- Increase funding for case management and shelter diversion initiatives in shelters and community agencies.
- Re-introduce funding for housing loss prevention programs.
- Offer rent bank services for those with temporary financial crises.
- Improve transitions from institutional care back into the community.

Tertiary prevention involves measures to ensure those who experienced homelessness never experience it again. The key is to provide housing stability and the appropriate supports, so families and individuals can find and maintain appropriate housing. Key initiatives include:

- Housing First Programs to quickly provide housing and appropriate support services.
- Supportive housing, whereby support services are either provided in-house or through portable services.
- Day Programs to provide on-going support and connection to the community for individuals housed through Housing First Programs.

A Complete Array of Safe, Suitable, and Affordable Housing Options

The key to fighting homelessness is to increase the supply of affordable housing. The City must be aggressive in pursuing all available measures to retain the existing stock of social housing and to increase the supply of housing that is truly affordable to those at risk of homelessness.

The Community Ministries recommend the following specific initiatives that should be pursued by the City of Ottawa:

Create Housing That Is Truly Affordable to Families and Individuals at Risk of Homelessness

The City of Ottawa's Progress Report on the 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan identifies the gap between low-income persons and average rents in Ottawa. For persons working at minimum wage, old age pensioners, and recipients of the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or Ontario Works (OW), the cost of renting a suitable home in Ottawa far exceeds what is

³ See for example the RAFT Program in the Niagara Region that helps homeless and at-risk youth maintain school attendance, secure housing and develop a social safety net in their home community.

considered a reasonable affordability standard (30% of gross income). In fact, in many cases, individuals must spend upwards of 50% of their income on housing, leaving far too little available for food, clothing and other necessities of life.

Either through building more affordable housing, retaining existing social housing, or providing portable housing benefits, the City must provide increased support for the 12% of Ottawa households in core housing need.

Use all Available Planning Tools To Ensure Affordable Housing Is Created in Every Ward of the City

Several municipalities across the country have been innovative in their use of planning tools to increase and retain the stock of affordable housing. These innovations flow from a clear political commitment to establish affordable housing as a key priority with set targets. Such measures can include inclusionary zoning policies; bylaws to prohibit and regulate demolition of residential rental properties; promoting second units (secondary suites) or garden suites on existing residential property; making affordable housing the first priority in awarding community benefits for height and density exchanges (Section 37 benefits); making surplus municipal lands available for affordable housing; and ensuring that transit-oriented development includes affordable housing. While the City of Ottawa has adopted some of these measures, they need to be implemented forcefully and consistently, and those measures not in place should be acted on promptly. A concerted effort to study and adopt the best approaches from other jurisdictions would ensure affordable housing is given high priority through local planning tools.

Create a Capital Reserve To Fund Affordable Housing Through Increased Property Taxes From Gentrification, Development Charges and Section 37 Benefits

Up until 2015, the City of Ottawa allocated on an annual basis \$4 million in its capital budget to be used for the development of more affordable housing. Since then, that allocation ceased, and the Capital Reserve for Affordable Housing is depleted. It is time to reinstate an annual capital allocation for affordable housing. While \$4 million is insufficient to make more than a dent in the overall need for social and affordable housing, it is better than doing nothing at all. The City should recognize and use potential sources of revenue for affordable housing. For example, when single family homes are replaced with multi-residential units, the City benefits from increased property taxes. Similarly, through on-going development, there is an increase in property taxes and development charges, as well as the use of Section 37 benefits for height and density increases. All of these potential sources of revenue should be tapped to make affordable housing the first priority to be achieved.

Aggressively Pursue Proposals for Available Funding Through the National Housing Strategy

The Federal Government recently adopted a National Housing Strategy that will make additional funds available across the country for affordable housing. Funds will be delivered either directly by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) or through the provinces. In either case, governments will want to ensure funds flow rapidly to municipal and other delivery partners, so that noticeable impacts on affordable housing will be achieved throughout the country. For the City of Ottawa, it means the City must aggressively be encouraging non-profit and private sector developers to begin working on the development of affordable housing proposals. The City must play a leadership role to identify potential land sites, earmark funds for matching requirements and work directly with partners to have shovel-ready projects available that will meet the need in Ottawa.

Improve Living Standards for Rooming Houses

One of the impacts of the lack of affordable housing in Ottawa is that rooming houses frequently become the only available option for many clients of the Community Ministries. Unfortunately, many of these homes are in substandard condition.



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Community Health Centres in Ottawa⁴ have documented the consequences of inadequate and unsuitable rooming houses on the health of residents. The City of Ottawa must take steps to ensure the Property Standards By-law is enforced in order to provide decent, liveable accommodation in rooming houses.

Conclusion

The Community Ministries call on municipal politicians to take a leadership role in alleviating the devastating consequences of homelessness in our City. Not only is there a moral obligation to do so, the economic benefits of preventing homelessness and promoting a more liveable city suggest it is the most fiscally responsible course of action. We call for:

- A Robust Strategy to Prevent Homelessness; and
- A Complete Array of Safe, Suitable and Affordable Housing Options

As the mid-point of the City's 10-year plan on Housing and Homelessness comes to an end, it is time for the City to do better. It is time to set meaningful goals and measure real progress. It is time to pursue every avenue to create affordable housing. It is time for homeless families and individuals to be housed and stay housed. It is time to prevent the tragedy of homelessness from affecting the quality of life in our community. It is time for Council to act.

⁴ Health and Housing in West-Central Ottawa: The Facts on Rooming Houses, Centretown Community Health Centre and Somerset West Community Health Centre, November, 2016.