

St. Stephen's Community House
Submission to the Ontario Long-Term Affordable Housing
Strategy
December 17, 2009

St. Stephen's Community House (SSCH) is a multi-service social agency serving more than 29,000 people each year. We focus on the inner-city neighbourhoods surrounding Kensington Market including Chinatown, Alexandra Park, Harbourfront, Little Italy and the Annex.

Our experience in providing services to newcomers, people who are homeless and under housed, youth, seniors and people who are unemployed, gives us a depth of understanding of affordable housing needs. In our experience, all these communities are facing growing challenges in the affordable housing market.

We support the submission by the Housing Network of Ontario which focuses on the following four priorities for a long-term affordable housing strategy:

1. **The affordability of housing**, including measures to increase the supply of affordable housing and to make existing housing more affordable.
2. **The availability of affordable housing** that is stable, safe and in a state of good repair, and which effectively addresses the diversity of needs in communities across Ontario.
3. **Supports, programs and protections** that will help all Ontarians equitably access and maintain adequate affordable housing and thrive in their communities.

4. **A clear way to measure progress**, with overall and population specific targets and timelines to ensure that housing insecurity and homelessness are being reduced.

Our organization has extensive experience in working on housing issues with our core constituencies. St. Stephen's held housing consultations with 107 participants from a range of backgrounds in 2008. Most people reported housing insecurity, spending two thirds of their monthly income or more on rent in the private housing market. A large majority reported they could not access rent supplements. Research shows that people should not spend more than one third of their income on rent, or else they risk becoming homeless. The only participants who were highly satisfied with their housing were those who live in housing co-operatives. **We urge the Ontario Government to make support for new housing co-operatives a key plank in the ten-year Strategy.**

Many people voiced the need for improvements to repair and maintenance in their social housing buildings, as well as building security issues. Seniors at Toronto Community Housing Corporation's (TCHC) Leonardo Court were particularly concerned about maintenance and repairs. They identified problems such as unhealthy mould, appliances in poor repair, flooding and expensive vandalism to vehicles in underground parking. While some of these repairs are starting to be made, the problem points to a much larger systemic issue at TCHC. The downloading of social housing to municipalities has put an extreme strain on the City of Toronto, which cannot afford the high costs of repairing and maintaining this aging housing stock. **We urge the Ontario Government to upload these ongoing housing operating costs, and to embark on a well financed program to repair and upgrade this deteriorating housing stock.**

Our service users expressed a strong interest in housing in mixed income communities. Newcomers we spoke with favour mixing with people from different backgrounds and incomes and see it as a good way to integrate into Canada. Inclusionary zoning is seen as a way to ensure that developers start to build affordable mixed income communities in downtown Toronto. Many of our participants rely on services that are located in the downtown core. They cannot afford the costs of travel in the inner suburbs. Furthermore, people depend on community centres, libraries, food banks and more that are more concentrated in the downtown core. **We recommend that the Ontario Government pass legislation quickly to enable inclusionary zoning across Ontario.**

People want to see all levels of government pay for the cost of affordable housing. Ontario, in particular, needs to immediately start building new affordable housing for those on low incomes, and at the same time providing economic stimulus to our provincial economy. St. Stephen's is very concerned that annually the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing has faced cuts, while most other ministries have not. This ministry has had reductions in their operating funds totaling 24% since 2005, with this fall's reduction totaling 7%. These ongoing cuts contradict the government's stated intention to implement an affordable housing strategy. Ontario spends the lowest amount per capita of any province in Canada on affordable housing. **Ontario needs to reverse this trend, and immediately begin spending 1 per cent of the provincial budget annually on the construction and maintenance of affordable housing.**

New affordable housing needs to be available to those living in extreme poverty, especially those on Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program and the working poor. It is a concern that the housing recently built in Ontario has mostly been unaffordable to those at the lowest end of this spectrum. Of course, the Federal Government must also contribute to housing

construction. We call on the Federal Government to introduce a national affordable housing program to help fund the plan. Legislation to this effect, Bill C-304, has passed second reading at the federal level and deserves wide support.

The Ontario Government should supply more shelter allowances to assist in housing affordability for those on the lowest incomes. Our participants are also looking for ways to access home ownership that is affordable. They want rent to own and lease to own options and other affordable entry level homes to be made available.

Participants in our Corner Drop-In who are under housed and live with mental health and substance use issues, want to see numerical targets set for supportive housing as part of an affordable housing strategy. Drop-In users have provided strong evidence of the need for supportive housing and the struggle to get their needs met in substandard and precarious private housing. Many people in this group live with concurrent disorders and disabilities in very poor private housing or in shelters.

We draw your attention to the *Street Health Report 2007* and the Wellesley Institute's *We Are Neighbours* May 2008 report which both call on the City to introduce numerical targets for supportive housing. **We support their call for 2,000 new supportive housing units annually in the City of Toronto alone.**

Two staff from St. Stephen's Community House and two service users from our drop-in took part in the July 2009 Toronto consultation to give input on the development of the Affordable Housing Strategy. The presence of St. Stephen's at this consultation reflects the urgency we feel about housing needs. At our Corner Drop-In, we have seen a steady increase in the number of clients coming each day, from 200 to almost 250 this year.

In July 2002, L. L. Odette Place – our supportive housing residence, was opened at our Augusta Centre location. This residence provides a home to 13 adult males, who once struggled with chronic homelessness and live with ongoing mental health challenges. Residents receive counseling, connection to health care, referrals to other social services and community support. They also access the other services offered at the Augusta Centre through our Corner Drop-in. With a place to call home and the needed supports, these men are enjoying a new sense of stability and dignity in their lives. This first-hand experience as a housing provider makes us well qualified to give input into the housing needs of this population. This range of services is essential for the success of any supportive housing project for this extremely vulnerable population.

We call on the Ontario Government to take immediate steps to begin work on this affordable housing strategy. Construction of new affordable units, new housing subsidies, inclusionary housing legislation, as well as the uploading of the responsibility for social housing from the City of Toronto to the Province, are all priorities.

Thank you for consideration of our submission.

Sincerely,

Keith Durrant

President, Board of Directors

Liane Regendanz

Executive Director