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FAST FACTS

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Housing It's Time to Set Targets

Low-income Manitobans are in desperate need of housing. Yet housing remains low on the list of priorities as we near the end of this provincial election campaign. Housing has had some scattered attention throughout the past few weeks, but the urgency and scope of the problem – a problem that is well known to low-income families and those close to them – is an issue that most Manitobans seem to be unaware of. But the growing membership of the *Right to Housing Coalition* suggests that this is slowly changing.

The lack of decent housing takes a huge toll on individuals, families and the broader community and it ought to be a priority for us all. Housing has been identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pre-requisite for good health. Housing is an essential tool to help governments attain other public policy objectives. Safe affordable housing is necessary to individual health and well-being, educational achievement, social inclusion, labour market attachment and healthy stable communities. Study after study; report after report; consultation after consultation, reveals that housing is among the most critical of challenges for poor households. However, a recent *Right to Housing Coalition* survey of Manitoba's political parties suggests a lack understanding of the urgency and extent of the problem.

Without stable, safe, adequate and low-cost housing,

low-income families are faced with challenges that most of us can only imagine. And although the statistics are alarming and well documented, they fail to capture the impact on real people and real lives.

In Manitoba, poor single adult women are living in rooming houses with doors that they cannot lock. Children are living in overcrowded conditions without a quiet place to study and do homework. Families are continuously uprooted due to inadequate housing, and this is affecting the social and educational outcomes of their children. Northern communities such as Thompson have seen a decrease in low cost housing as landlords rehabilitate declining stock and boost rents to meet the upper end rental market. Community workers hear stories of women and girls trading sex for a place to sleep. Children without stable housing are changing schools several times in a year and often drop out completely. Refugees are being placed in neglected and dangerous housing where violence triggers traumatic memories from the violence of war that they recently fled. Aboriginal families arriving from the North in search of work and opportunity, drift from 'couch to couch', relying on the kindness of friends and family to give them a roof over their head if only for a few nights. Indeed, there are many troubling stories.

Housing policy is complicated and solutions are equally complex, requiring intervention from both the



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***FASTFACTS* continued ...**

market and the state. But in spite of the complexity, housing advocates and community organizations who work with under-housed families everyday have learned some simple lessons. Politicians who truly want to address this issue would be well-advised to listen. Through the collective experience of some 20 organizations and a growing number of individual members, the expanding *Right to Housing Coalition* has learned that:

- The market can't fix this problem. If it could, it would have by now.
- What the poorest Manitobans need most is low-cost housing that is safe, decent and stable, and such housing will not be created without considerable ongoing support from governments.
- "Affordable" housing – the term often used by governments and politicians -- is a meaningless term for the poor unless it comes with criteria that results in housing with rents in line with income.
- Homeownership initiatives for low-income families are honorable, but they are neither attainable nor desirable for all households, such as those families who rely on welfare or those earning minimum wage.
- Social housing does not create ghettos. The lack of investment in new and existing social housing, and current policies that push people out as soon as they begin to get ahead, results in ghettos. The hopelessness and despair resulting from racism, isolation, lack of opportunity and inadequate social supports creates ghettos.

In spite of the reality that the private market has failed to adequately meet housing need, it continues to be the main mechanism relied on to solve all housing need. Social housing-- housing that is government supported to ensure that rents are in line with a household's ability to pay-- is a solution that is avoided because it requires a long term commitment that governments are increasingly reluctant to provide. The *Right to Housing Coalition* believes that a central component of government housing strategy must include a commitment to ongoing publicly funded support for new supply as well as

improvements in existing supply. And they want governments to make commitments that they can be held accountable to.

The *Right to Housing Coalition* believes that the best way to measure success is to set some targets. The Canada Housing and Renewal Association has identified a need for 25,000 new units each year with a target of 1000 new units each year for Manitoba. While such a commitment would require support from the federal government—support that is currently lacking—the provincial government has a responsibility to take a leadership role in setting social housing targets and introducing new units immediately. In absence of a federal commitment, the *Right to Housing Coalition* is proposing a modest expectation of 300 subsidized units per year--province wide--for 5 years. It is not enough, but it's a start. According to provincial government estimates, this would cost between \$37.5 million to \$60 million in capital costs per year and \$1.45 - \$2.16 million in additional subsidies annually. This represents less than 1% of the projected provincial budgetary expenditures for the next budget year. There is also a critical need for maintenance and improvement of the existing supply and this too will require an increase in government investment.

A comprehensive housing strategy that includes targets for social housing is a critical component of a government's social and economic plan. The *Right to Housing Coalition* has provided some very attainable and measurable targets for government to work toward. The government that is elected on May 22nd ought to work with the community to see that these targets are met.

- Shauna MacKinnon

Shauna MacKinnon is the Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Manitoba. For more information about the Right to Housing Coalition contact Clark Brownlee at clark_brownlee@mts.net. For results of the Right to Housing Coalition survey see the CCPA-MB election blog at: ccpamb.wordpress.com. This article first appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press on Thursday May 17th, 2007.



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