



FASTFACTS



Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb • 309-323 Portage Ave. • Winnipeg, MB • Canada R3B 2C1
 ph: (204) 927-3200 • fax: (204) 927-3201 • ccpanb@policyalternatives.ca • www.policyalternatives.ca/mb

March 2, 2005

What's happening to Low Income Rental Housing in Winnipeg's inner city??

The West Central Network is a coalition of workers, mostly in health, social and community services, who work in the West Central community, bounded by Portage, Central Park, Notre Dame and Arlington.

In West Central, the average household income is \$26,387.00, the incidence of low income private households is 52% and 76% of the residents are renters.

At least four community groups have been actively renovating run-down houses, for resale, in West Central. Although the improved condition of the housing stock and influx of new people into the neighbourhood has been positive, low income people have not benefited from this development. They in fact, now have fewer housing options. Members of the West Central Network see the effects of this in the lives of people, every day.

The West Central Network recently had a discussion about rental housing for low income people, based on the day to day experience of Network members. This is a summary of that discussion.

Public Housing

The condition of Manitoba Housing apartment blocks has deteriorated. In particular the removal of live-in caretakers has created instability. Good live-in caretakers help ward off problems and ensure quick responses when there is a problem. Since the removal of caretakers, there is no one onsite to respond to disruptive tenants. When an emergency is phoned in to offsite security, it's often too late by the time they show up.

Additional on-going concerns with Manitoba Housing include low vacancy rates and long waiting lists. Winnipeg Rehabilitation Housing is a public rent-geared-to-income organization that works better. It's well managed and well resourced by live-in caretakers.

Private housing

The vacancy rate in private rental housing is also very low and what is available is often poor quality. This impacts the

lives of people in a myriad of ways.

Some low income people who have positive ties in the neighbourhood and contribute to the life of the community are forced to move elsewhere for available affordable housing. Some women leave decent housing to escape an abusive situation. They give up the kids while trying to get back on their feet, but end up not being able to get them back because they can't find housing that's big enough and affordable. People commonly contribute to their rent out of the food budget, which creates food insecurity.

Many people end up "moving from bad place to bad place" trying to find something better. This is disruptive in numerous ways, including to children's schooling. Others end up living in rundown hotels. Kids are growing up in substandard, underheated, unsafe situations. Some owners make efforts to upgrade and renovate their properties. But then they raise the rent to levels beyond the reach of welfare recipients or the working poor.

Other private, profit driven companies are buying up a high number of properties and doing little in renovations and upkeep. These places are filled with welfare recipients and the working poor who can't afford anything better.

New Canadian immigrants and refugees face particular problems. Some managers won't rent to visible minorities - especially new immigrants who speak little English, have no references and are not employed. Even if they come with bank statements demonstrating their savings, they are often turned down. Some landlords force newcomers to come up with a guarantor or pay six months of rent in advance, saying that this is a normal expectation.

Rental units for large families are particularly scarce. This is a concern for all families, but immigrants and refugees often come with large immediate and extended families, so



Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-MB

they are particularly affected. People with addictions also have a difficult time finding landlords who will rent to them.

Workers in community organizations in West Central are constantly faced with people looking for places to live. "Almost everyday people come to our office & ask us if we know where they could find suitable housing nearby. We usually have to say that we don't."

What's the root of the problem?

There are many factors contributing to the housing problem. Funding for social housing was stopped in the early '90s and we are seeing the effects now. Clearly, the connection between housing and well-being is not being made at the budget and policy level of governments

The wages of the working poor and welfare rental rates are not adequate to pay for good housing. People on welfare have not seen an increase in rental rates in years. Welfare rates in general are only marginally higher than they were after they were cutback in the '90s.

Resources for Manitoba Housing have diminished. In many instances, government programs that provide resources to landlords and tenants continue to be funded at 1980 levels. Initiatives such as Waverley West divert money to the margins of the city, away from older neighbourhoods where the need is greatest. City bylaws and zoning regulations are inadequate, and don't reflect the potential for requiring a diversity in housing for a range of income levels.

What we think needs to happen

All levels of government need to be involved in social housing. The Federal government needs to re-instate significant funding for social housing. Build new ones. Improve existing ones. Significantly increase the number of rent-geared-to-income housing units.

The Provincial government must implement policies that put more money in people's pockets. Increasing minimum wage rates and social assistance levels will give people more options. This would also benefit responsible landlords who could use the cash to make improvements. If renters have more options, there will also be pressure on landlords to improve the quality of the housing stock.

The Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation (MHRC) must re-instate support for live-in caretakers in their buildings. Good live-in caretakers facilitate a better living environment by responding to problems, maintaining buildings and providing a link to the community. Winnipeg Rehabilitation Housing Corporation is a model that works well.

The Province needs to develop policies that better respond to changing needs. Examples include rental subsidies that travel with the tenant, alternative forms of housing such as

singles housing or family co-ops, well managed rooming houses, expanded support for community based housing organizations and purchasing land for resale to non-profits.

Improving access to the Residential Tenancies Branch for tenants and landlords by waiving filing fees for low-income renters and having community based RTB workers would be helpful for both renters and landlords.

The City can also play an important role by encouraging mixed housing development through tax incentives and stronger bylaws. The City should resist the temptation to divert monies to wealthy suburbs at the expense of inner city development and instead increase their commitment to inner city revitalization.

Conclusion

It is clear that initiatives that promote home ownership in low income communities do not go far enough to address the range of housing needs. Rental housing is the most viable option for most residents in communities like West Central.

Governments at all levels have a role to play in creating better housing for low income renters. This will require an appreciation for the connection between housing and well-being.

While increasing over all income is important in allowing renters more housing options, this needs to go hand in hand with increasing the available rental housing stock and improving the existing stock. More options and supports for quality rental housing will benefit both tenants and responsible owners. It is critical to act now. Too many low income renters are living in unacceptable situations.

CCPA-MB *FASTFACTS*

are produced and distributed electronically on a regular basis.

They can be reproduced as an OpEd or opinion piece without obtaining further permission, provided they are not edited, and credit is given.

If you would like to receive the *FASTFACTS*, please contact the CCPA-MB to begin your free subscription.

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb

309-323 Portage Ave.

Winnipeg, MB

Canada R3B 2C1

ph: (204) 927-3200

fax: (204) 927-3201

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

www.policyalternatives.ca/mb