



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

April 1, 2020

Homelessness, precarious housing and COVID-19

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Governments around the world are urgently acting to minimize the impact of COVID-19. As we focus on isolating and caring for those who are sick, promoting physical distancing for others, and assuring Canadians that governments will provide a safety net, the importance of housing stability cannot be overstated.

Many Canadians are deeply concerned about losing their homes. Rightly so. Given the unpredictability of a global pandemic, it is likely that the 46 percent of Canadians who are \$200 or less away from financial insolvency will be struggling significantly come April 1st. Many workers have been laid off, and we can anticipate more lay-offs in the weeks to come.

A recent Angus Reid study showed that one third of Canadians polled are concerned that they won't be able to pay their rent or mortgage. Some of the pressure will be relieved through federal emergency measures including the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, which will provide \$2000 per month for up to four months for those who have lost employment income. Several banks have announced mortgage interest deferrals to help homeowners weather the storm.

But what about those who were homeless or precariously housed before COVID-19? Where do they go?

In Manitoba, 26 percent of tenant

households live in housing that is poor quality, too small, or too expensive, and can't afford to move somewhere better. For the thousands of households who are homeless, on wait lists for public housing, or being turned away from domestic violence shelters, immediate access to secure housing is an urgent concern.

Housing is an essential first line of defense against community spread of COVID-19. Despite this, we have yet to see a Canada-wide, comprehensive response to ensure that renters will be well protected and those without a home will get one. Interventions to date have focused on emergency regulations and income supports. There has been no discussion about housing supply.

The U.K., a leader in the privatization of public housing, is now embracing its importance. The government recently ordered its public housing authorities to ensure that all rough sleepers are housed immediately. A leading housing advocate described the move "a landmark moment" that could have a lasting impact if "a package of support [is put in place] so that, when the outbreak subsides, the outcome is not that people return to the streets."

The Right to Housing Coalition and Make Poverty History Manitoba are calling on governments to collaborate on immediate action on income supports as well as

there is an alternative.

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investment in new supply of low-rent housing.

So far, the Manitoba government has announced an immediate moratorium on evictions and a ban on rent increases as of April 1st. This will assure renters that they will not lose their housing and assist them with planning their finances to stay housed. Manitoba Hydro and the City of Winnipeg have announced that services will not be disconnected for those unable to pay their hydro, water, and sewer bills. This is a good start, but our public utilities must go further by waiving fees for all households that have had an interruption in earnings as a result of COVID-19.

The real test will be how we support people over the long term.

We do not know how long the pandemic will last, how long social distancing will be required, nor how the economy will recover afterwards. Renters who are unable to pay their rent need assurance that they will not be indebted to landlords after the crisis subsides. The Government of Canada, in partnership with the Province, should add an additional program to its emergency package, with dedicated funding to provide rent relief to households that have lost income as a result of COVID-19.

Manitoba can extend supports to renters quickly by expanding the breadth and depth of its Rent Assist program, using a portion of the projected \$272 million 'savings' resulting from keeping the PST at 7 percent. This will give financially-strapped renters peace of mind knowing that they will not owe thousands of dollars in rent after the crisis has subsided.

Those who are unsheltered need access to stable housing now. The three levels of government must immediately expand the supply of public housing by purchasing vacant and low-vacancy residential buildings that may be in need of repair but sufficiently safe to house people now.

After the crisis subsides, further investment can be made through the

existing Manitoba-Canada bi-lateral housing agreement. Through that agreement, Manitoba is required to increase the supply of social housing. Under these exceptional circumstances, it would make sense to begin now.

We can manage community spread of COVID-19 and leave a legacy of ending homelessness too. But it will require bold and swift action by governments in collaboration with the front-line agencies working with the most vulnerable.

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