



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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## Federal housing strategy key to improving child welfare

**B**efore the findings of the Hughes commission report on the death of Phoenix Sinclair have been lost and forgotten and before the next child dies needlessly, we must all be reminded that there are more issues at play than the effectiveness of the Child Welfare System.

The article "Broken Childhoods" in the Winnipeg Free Press, February 8, 2014 was helpful in outlining several serious and significant issues, some of which go back to the very way in which Europeans took over the land and culture of the Aboriginal people who live here. The authors, Sanders and Welch do a fine job of connecting the dots between colonialism, system mistrust, poverty, poor mental health and child neglect that together can lead to abuse and worse.

The toxic mixture of these entrenched forces has resulted in a disproportionate number of Aboriginal people living in poverty and of Aboriginal children in care. Many children in care are there because of the burdens that living in poverty impose on them, including the stress of transience. The Hughes commission emphasizes this reality several times but we have known it for years. The question remains, "Where is the will to do something about it?" The recommendations that are aimed at the Child Welfare System are clearly the responsibility of the Manitoba Department of Family Services. There are also programs within the Manitoba Government, including those linked to the AllAboard Poverty Reduction and Social

Inclusion Strategy that are specifically aimed at reducing poverty. However, responsibility for attacking the root causes of poverty does not rest with provincial governments alone.

One of the many causes (and effects) of poverty is that the exclusive and profit-driven housing market, results in an insufficient supply of adequate and affordable housing. This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the federal government's decision in January 1994 to withdraw completely from the provision of long-term funding for new social housing. This decision in itself has deprived some of the most vulnerable Canadians of over 100,000 homes. Between 1985 and 1989, the federal government helped fund 5,356 units of social housing per year. If Ottawa had continued to fund social housing at this rate, between 1994 and 2013, some 107,120 homes could have been built.

In January 1994, the budget of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) was frozen at \$2 billion and CMHC no longer funded new social housing. The billions of dollars of profit from the sale mortgage insurance that CMHC used to invest in social housing was turned into government revenue to be used for other programs. No subsequent federal government, whether Conservative or

there is an alternative.

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Liberal, has overturned this decision. Short-term funding programs for “affordable housing” have occasionally been supported. The Conservative government now spends just \$250 million per year on housing programs across Canada.

The federal withdrawal sounded the death knell for low-income housing programs, which have never been re-established. According to the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, without an adequate supply of rent geared to income housing more than 380,000 tenant households in Canada are in severe housing need (living in poverty and spending more than 50% of their income on rent in inadequate and slum housing). It has left at least 5,000, households waiting for such housing across Manitoba, including more than 3,000 in Winnipeg. Each year 200,000 Canadians experience homelessness and as many as 1.3 million have experienced homelessness or extremely insecure housing in the last five years.

In fairness, the Government of Manitoba recognizes this supply problem and has, with their non-profit partners, created about 3,000 social and affordable housing units over the last five years. Their current pledge is to create 500 units each of social and affordable housing over the next three years. That being said, successive ministers have acknowledged that these initiatives do not begin to meet the need.

As a society we have a lot to be accountable for regarding the state of child welfare but we should never lose sight of the underlying causes that create the problems the child welfare system is supposed to solve. These causes are much deeper and of much longer duration than the adding or training of social workers alone can resolve. A national housing strategy sustainable for at least ten years, led by the federal government, that includes all levels of government, First Nations, non-profits and the private sector would be the start of dealing directly with one aspect of poverty. A bill to this effect,

Bill C-400 the *Secure, Adequate, Accessible, and Affordable Housing Act*, was tabled and defeated in the House of Commons last year. We ask “Where is the will?” Clearly, it is not in Ottawa.

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