



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Make Homelessness History

Homelessness has recently been much in the news, because of the tragic deaths of three homeless people in Winnipeg and also because of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association's National Congress on Housing and Homelessness, held last week in Winnipeg. Canada is one of the very few advanced industrialized countries in the world that does not have a national housing strategy, and for low-income people in particular the consequences are severe, and sometimes deadly.

Yet there are solutions, as evidenced by three tours organized by last week's National Conference to the Lord Selkirk Park housing complex in Winnipeg's North End. Each of the tours was sold out and had a wait list of people wanting to see Lord Selkirk Park and discover what has been done there to make it such a success.

Lord Selkirk Park opened in 1967, as part of Canada's Urban Renewal strategy. The first tenants were thrilled, but by the mid-1970s the public housing complex was struggling. By the 1990s it was half empty, units were boarded up, and people who lived and worked there regularly referred to it as a "war zone." Nobody wanted to live there. By 2005 when we began working there with Janice Goodman and the North End Community Renewal Corporation, conditions were the same. One person interviewed then said that she hated the place and what it was doing to families, and believed "the whole fucking place ought to be bulldozed."

Public housing projects have in fact been bulldozed all across Canada and the USA, making even worse an already severe shortage of low-income rental housing.

At Lord Selkirk Park we took a different approach. We saw that the housing units were structurally sound and were an asset, and that there were a number of strong individuals and families in the community who were also assets. Rather than bulldoze, we adopted a "rebuilding from within" strategy. We worked steadily to develop relationships with and to earn the trust of the residents of Lord Selkirk Park, and we worked hard to implement solutions that they said were needed. They said they needed a safe place to go during the day where they could have a cup of tea and talk with others. We established a Resource Centre in two of the then many empty units. Single mothers told us they wanted to get their grade 12 so that they could get off welfare, but transportation and lack of childcare were barriers. We worked to establish, right in the heart of Lord Selkirk Park, an Adult Learning Centre that offers the mature grade 12 diploma and a literacy program for those not quite ready for grade 12, and when those were up and running we established a childcare centre.

We put pressure on and negotiated with the provincial government to invest public dollars in these solutions. In each case the Province responded positively.

there is an alternative.

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Further, following the 2007-2008 global financial crisis the Province invested over \$20 million of its fiscal stimulus package to renovate every one of the 314 units in Lord Selkirk Park, and complied with our insistence that local people be hired to do much of the renovating.

And it has worked.

Today, the Lord Selkirk Park that was half empty in the 1990s is completely occupied. Turnover is down. There is a wait list of people wanting to get in—if anyone had said when we started in 2005 that within a decade there would a waitlist of people wanting to get into Lord Selkirk Park, we would have laughed and said “impossible!” But it’s true. There are now 42 refugee and immigrant newcomer families living in Lord Selkirk Park. They have integrated successfully with the largely Aboriginal population. The Adult Learning Centre has graduated 70 people with their mature grade 12 diploma since June 2009. The Literacy Program is full to capacity, with people from the housing complex who want to improve their circumstances. The childcare centre—where the Abecedarian approach to childcare is being piloted in Canada—is producing remarkable results. Children are thriving, and so too are their parents. A recent evaluation of the Resource Centre described its “profound impact in the lives of neighbourhood residents.” And the community is far safer than was the case a decade ago.

Conference delegates from all across Canada who were on one or other of the three sold-out tours of Lord Selkirk Park were genuinely amazed by what has been achieved here.

But there is no need to be amazed. We don’t have to have homelessness in Winnipeg or anywhere else in Canada. We can solve this problem, and Lord Selkirk Park shows how. Doing so requires that we believe in the capabilities of low-income people, that we hear them when they tell

us what they need, and that governments invest public dollars to meet those needs. We did that in Lord Selkirk Park, and the results have been dramatic.

Why in the world are we not doing more of this?

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