



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

November 23, 2015

National Housing Day: A profile of WestEnd Commons

This past weekend marked Canada's National Housing Day. In recent history, housing in Canada hasn't been a hopeful topic. In 1993 federal funds for new social housing development were cut and responsibility for social housing was devolved to the provinces. Provinces have since borne the brunt of filling this funding gap and, because provinces have less fiscal capacity than the feds, homelessness has increased.

Despite these odds, Winnipeg can boast a hopeful housing story in the case of WestEnd Commons. If one passes by the one hundred-year-old St. Matthews Anglican Church in Winnipeg's West End, it appears that life is carrying on as usual. But inside, four floors of social and affordable housing are built within the walls of this historic church. One year ago, twenty-six diverse families moved in and are now enjoying safe and affordable housing. WestEnd Commons is also home to five faith communities and a social enterprise that rents space to community agencies. WestEnd Commons is an innovative, community-driven development with a vision to transform the building into a "collaborative community of hope, joy and strength."

In the last few decades, St. Matthews Anglican Church experienced dwindling parishioner numbers and a massive building that was falling apart. When faced with the choice to close or renew, they chose to renew. Rather than focusing on the deficits,

they saw the assets. Rather than leaving the neighbourhood or selling their building to a private developer, this church of one hundred parishioners chose to continue their long history of being rooted in the neighbourhood. They used their energy, creativity, and overabundance of space to create family housing that is affordable.

WestEnd Commons provides family housing in a community-based environment. Already within the first year, tenants at WestEnd Commons are experiencing positive changes. The majority of tenants say they feel safer and more secure at WestEnd Commons compared to their previous accommodations. Overcrowding is no longer an issue for families, as there are appropriate numbers of bedrooms for all family members. Families have more money in their pockets due to the subsidized rents. One tenant notes that their monthly family budget increase of \$300 dollars means they no longer have to accumulate credit card debt to get through the month, they have a family car, and they can eat healthier food. Parents with children apprehended by Child and Family Services (CFS) are getting their children back in their care because they live at WestEnd Commons. A lack of good housing can prevent families from being reunified after CFS interventions. WestEnd Commons has recognized this, and works at

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prioritizing the housing of families whose last step in their CFS reunification plan is stable housing. This quick snapshot demonstrates immediate positive changes that families can experience when they are housed safely and affordably.

Investment in Affordable Housing (IAH), the current affordable housing agreement between the provincial and federal governments, is intended to be a 50/50 matching ratio. In reality, Manitoba has been heavily over-matching funding for housing since 2009—that is, Manitoba has been paying the bulk of the costs of the social housing that is being built. While the provincial government deserves full credit for their role in building social housing, this model is not sustainable.

Without significant federal investment and a national housing strategy, creating safe and affordable housing for all Canadians is impossible. In the case of WestEnd Commons, it is not a long-term plan for the federal government to rely on the extraordinary efforts of faith leaders—who possess little to no experience in building housing—to provide such an essential need for the community. What would have come of WestEnd Commons had St. Matthew's Anglican Church chosen to sell their building and leave the neighbourhood? What if the church had decided not to earmark a portion of reserved funds for low-income housing? Would this housing complex not have come to fruition without these acts of goodwill? The right to safe and affordable housing is too imperative to be left to chance.

For over two decades, the federal government hasn't been at the social and affordable housing table. This National Housing Day, Canadians can be cautiously expectant that change is afoot around affordable housing. In Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's recently released ministerial mandate letters, made public

“so Canadians can hold us accountable to deliver on our commitments,” a commitment was made to re-establish a federal role and investment in affordable rental housing. A national housing strategy has also been prioritized, which would make Canada the last G8 country to establish such a strategy.

Canadians expect that Trudeau's commitments to invest in social and affordable housing are more than platitudes. If followed through, investments in low-income housing could move WestEnd Commons from being an anomaly serving 26 families in Winnipeg, to being the norm across the country.

Canadians need the federal government to play a strong role in the provision of social and affordable housing. When they do, we will all benefit. They've made the commitment – now let's hold them to account to turn the commitment into action.

*Jess Klassen is a housing researcher with Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, conducting 3-year studies at both WestEnd Commons and IRCOM House. More about the case of WestEnd Commons can be found in the newly released *Poor Housing: A Silent Crisis*, edited by Josh Brandon and Jim Silver.*

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