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FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Further poverty reduction efforts needed in Manitoba

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There is some good news in the Province's recently released second annual All Aboard report, which tracks poverty and social exclusion in Manitoba. However, it's clear that much more needs to be done.

The report looks at 21 indicators covering areas such as housing, community belonging, education, employment, earnings, poverty rates, income inequality, early learning and childcare, children in care, teen birth rates, and health.

Since the All Aboard poverty reduction and social inclusion strategy was announced in 2009, there has been a 5.3 percent increase in the number of social and affordable housing units supported by the Province, an 8 percent increase in graduation rates, and a 5.5 percent increase in the availability of licensed childcare.

Despite government efforts, there is still a long way to go. Poverty rates have been on a downward trend over the last decade, but have increased in recent years. The proportion of children in care of the child welfare system has risen by 29 percent. A higher proportion of urban households live in quality, affordable, and appropriate housing now than in years before the strategy, but these gains have been lost in recent years. New immigrants and

Aboriginal people are more likely to live in housing that is unaffordable, unsuitable or in poor condition.

Ensuring access to affordable housing is critical to a successful poverty reduction strategy. Efforts to educate, train, and employ low income people are unlikely to be successful if they can't access safe and stable housing. This basic need improves mental and physical health while providing a foundation from which people can access important social services and participate more fully in the community.

Manitobans who were consulted on All Aboard agree – housing was ranked highest among seven areas where government should invest more to reduce poverty and social exclusion. The Right to Housing coalition has long called for increases in the supply of social housing – where rent is geared to income. Make Poverty History Manitoba represented over 145 organizations that called for an increase to housing benefits for people on social assistance.

The Province has responded with significant commitments. This year, it fulfilled a commitment to deliver

there is an alternative.

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1,500 new units of affordable housing and to support 1,500 households in accessing social housing. By 2016 it promises to build another 500 units each of affordable and social housing.

In addition, Budget 2014 introduced Rent Assist, a housing benefit available to all low income Manitobans to assist with private rental expenses. The Province has committed to increasing Rent Assist's maximum benefit level to 75% of median market rent over a four-year period.

While these important commitments help address the affordable housing crisis, thousands of more units are needed to meet demand. Approximately one in ten Manitoba households live in inadequate housing. The majority of these are unable to access housing that costs less than 30% of their household income. Many are forced to rely on food banks as they dip into food budgets to cover shelter costs. Others end up homeless.

Clearly, there is a need for further increases to the supply of social housing. Meanwhile, the ongoing expiration of federal housing subsidies threatens to erode the supply of existing stock. While other levels of government must do their part, we must continue to call on the Province to preserve housing stock while ensuring that additions to supply are net increases and do not come at the expense of other important housing initiatives.

This requires an increase to the housing budget, which was frozen in Budget 2014. The government has found ways to increase spending on the justice and healthcare systems. Many who are incarcerated do not have access to safe and affordable housing at the time of arrest. We know that adequate housing is associated with decreased crime and

better health outcomes. The Province would be wise to increase investments in housing to address the underlying factors that contribute to rising justice and healthcare costs.

Community groups will be listening to the upcoming throne speech for the government's commitment to prioritize funding for housing. They will be expecting an increase to the housing budget in Budget 2015 to meet supply commitments without jeopardizing other important housing initiatives. They will also be expecting a significant investment in Rent Assist to bring the government much closer to meeting its target maximum benefit level of 75% of median market rent, sooner than in four years. This too must be achieved without clawing back other benefits available to low income Manitobans.

This week the Province began community consultations for Budget 2015. Legislation requires the government to take its poverty reduction strategy into account when preparing the budget. Finance Minister Jennifer Howard should heed the call of community groups that are asking the Province to prioritize housing and invest in the necessary foundation for the long-term success of Manitoba's poverty reduction strategy.

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