

Housing and Homelessness Network in Ontario (HHNO)

February 14 and 15, 2002

We held two days of meetings with 40 housing advocates representing coalitions and community-based organizations across the province. We came from Parry Sound, Toronto, Kingston, Guelph, Windsor, York Region, London, Ottawa, Bracebridge, Belleville, Agincourt, Kitchener-Waterloo, Etobicoke, Sault Ste. Marie, Hamilton, North Bay and the Native Home Providers in Ontario.

We make the following observations:

DEVASTATING HOUSING CRISIS: The official indicators point to a serious, province-wide housing crisis. The face of the crisis looks different in Windsor, Belleville, North Bay or Guelph. It has particular impact on women, Aboriginal, youth, seniors and people with disabilities. The roots include the interrelated issues of affordability, supply and discrimination. The official Ontario rental vacancy rate is a critically low 1.7%. But the real picture that emerged from our forum shows that the situation is much worse. We heard that sky-rocketing electricity rates and a deposit requirement of \$800 in Muskoka is driving tenants out of their homes. We heard of the recent study submitted to Sault Ste. Marie City Council on January 28, 2002, which identifies 20 homeless people sleeping rough on the streets, 112 staying in homeless shelters and nearly 20% of the entire population classified as “hidden homeless” (which includes “couch-surfers”, people in jails, those crowded into substandard accommodation). Counting the many “hidden homeless” across the province would create a negative vacancy rate for Ontario. This gives a better picture of the true housing crisis. Average rents are increasingly rapidly at double the rate of inflation or higher, but tenant incomes are stagnant or declining. Welfare and other income programs, along with the minimum wage, do not give renter households enough income to afford rents in most parts of the province. Discrimination, either overt or structural, has a major impact for many in Ontario, especially Aboriginal people, women, youth, families and children, people of colour, newcomers, people on social assistance and others.

ADEQUATE PROVINCIAL RESOURCES: Ontario is the richest province in one of the richest countries in the world. Our province has the financial resources to make sure that every resident has access to good quality, decent, safe, affordable housing. Spending on housing and income assistance is an investment in people. This investment not only creates valuable assets, such as housing, but it also generates economic activity, including jobs and tax revenues. We join with our colleagues in the National Housing and Homelessness Network in calling for renewed federal housing and social spending.

FAILED ECONOMIC EXPERIMENT: Since 1995, the Ontario government has made deliberate choices to give priority to tax cuts that primarily benefit wealthy individuals and corporations, instead of social programs (including housing) that benefit the 4.5 million people living in renter households. Currently, the province spends about \$12

billion on tax cuts, yet spends zero dollars on new housing supply and a decreasing amount many other vital social programs. We also note that the federal government has abandoned its historic role in funding new housing and other social programs. Since 1995, the provincial government has explicitly relied on the private sector to deliver housing and many basic services. Private developers and landlords have failed over the past six years to deliver the housing that Ontarians need. This experiment has failed and the signs of the failure are in the human and economic costs of the province-wide housing crisis. Contrary to the provincial government's promise (at the time that it introduced major changes to tenant protection laws) of 15,000 new units annually, the actual delivery has been less than 2,000 units annually – and most are not affordable.

HISTORY OF SUCCESS: There is a history of success in addressing housing needs in Ontario. We don't lack for solutions, but we have a critical lack of political will, and the proper allocation of government resources, to apply the solutions. For instance, Aboriginal housing providers effectively manage more than 2,000 urban housing units. But provincial government decisions, including the cancellation of new housing supply programs in 1995 and cuts to various services, have disrupted or destroyed a valuable community infrastructure.

NEW SUPPLY: The Ontario Ministry of Finance's "mid-range" scenario projects the need for an additional 18,400 new units annually. The province must fund new supply to meet the needs that it is projecting. The first priority for this new housing should be households that need it the most. Funding for new social housing supply should be conditional on non-discriminatory rental practices. The stock should remain affordable. A fully-funded program to create 18,400 units would cost about \$900 million annually. A full range of housing options is needed in all parts of the province, including emergency shelters (which are not available in some parts of Ontario), transitional housing, supportive housing (for tenants with special needs) and permanent housing, but the emphasis should be on long-term, social housing.

ABORIGINAL CONTROL OF ABORIGINAL HOUSING: The approximately 2,000 off-reserve Aboriginal housing units in Ontario falls well short of the need. Aboriginal people represent a disproportionately large number of homeless people. Any new supply must include a targeted Aboriginal component to create Aboriginal housing under Aboriginal control.

NORTHERN COMMUNITIES: Government statistics often ignore Northern areas because the populations are below survey thresholds. Northern, rural and remote communities lack adequate funding for services and social housing. Income security issues are particularly important in Northern Ontario. Access to government services, including the Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal, are severely limited.

ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING: All Ontarians have the right to an adequate standard of living. This includes the right to a decent wage. Those that are unable to work, have the right to adequate income supports, including social assistance and other

income assistance programs. We support an annual income for all Ontarians that reflects the real costs of housing, food and other basics.

DISCRIMINATION IN HOUSING: Access to good quality, affordable housing is a basic human right. Cornerstones of the right to housing are economic security and the right to secure tenure. The *Ontario Human Rights Code* and principles of non-discrimination and equality must be upheld in the provision of all types of housing.

EFFECTIVE RENT CONTROL: The new system of rent regulation, introduced in 1998, has failed to protect tenants. Rent increases in recent years have increased at more than double the rate of inflation. Annual average increases have been above the rent control guideline. We believe that full rent controls need to be re-established.

FULL TENANT PROTECTION: The so-called *Tenant Protection Act* needs to be replaced with a law that provides for a law that actually protects tenants and for a fair process with proper notification and adequate timelines. The Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal has ordered 116,605 renter households to be evicted without a hearing since June of 1998.

EXISTING SUPPLY: The Ontario government abolished the *Rental Housing Protection Act* in 1998. Since then, there has been a big increase in the demolition and conversion of affordable rental housing, leading to a net loss of rental stock in some communities. Declining property standards and lack of effective enforcement in many communities has led to substandard conditions in existing units. Despite netting hundreds of millions in rent increase annually, landlords have failed to invest in maintaining rental buildings. In addition, the government has attempted to sell social housing and reduce the level of rent-g geared-to-income subsidies, which also threatens existing supply.

UTILITY RATES AND OTHER COSTS: Sky-rocketing utility rates, including electricity and water/sewer charges, are creating serious financial distress for many tenants, and forcing some tenant households from their homes. We oppose the privatization of Ontario Hydro, which will inevitably bring cost increases. We heard of sewer/water charges of \$60 per tenant household in Parry Sound, which brings a major burden to tenant households. Other costs, including growing daycare fees, are also creating a burden for renter households.

WHO PAYS FOR WHAT: Municipalities have been saddled with the cost of provincial social housing programs. Funding and other income-support programs from property taxes is bad public policy. Senior levels of government should either resume funding these programs or provide municipalities with the appropriate taxing powers.

HOMES NOT JAILS: There are already too many homeless people crowded into the province's jails. We oppose any plans that further criminalize poor and homeless people and force more into jails. We demand a commitment to decrease the current levels of incarceration. Continued over-incarceration and unnecessary short-term sentencing creates more homelessness and wastes money that should be spent on affordable housing,

social programs, prevention programs and alternatives to incarcerations. We oppose the privatization of correctional facilities.

We appeal to Ontario's collective conscience to demand effective action from our provincial government.