

National Housing Strategy

Shelter is a fundamental human right, yet Canada is in the midst of a housing and homelessness crisis. Most people lose their housing in Ontario because they can't afford it. The crisis in homelessness is a direct result of disinvestment in affordable housing over the last 25 years, a rapid decline in fulltime permanent well-paying jobs, and cuts to social and other programs.

Homelessness should not be viewed as an individual failure, rather it should be understood as a systemic issue - as a condition which the state, by treating housing as a commodity instead of a basic necessity, has both facilitated and condoned.

The Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario began to build a campaign to change the conversation in Canada about housing and homelessness.

The first thing we did was to bring together organizations and individuals to form the [Right to Housing \(R2H\) coalition](#), which includes people who have experienced homelessness, community activists, academics and lawyers.

Second, we began to build a collective understanding of what we meant by the right to housing.

Finally, we began to construct a campaign which included taking the federal and provincial governments to court for violating the right to housing. Four extraordinary individuals and a community organization stepped forward as applicants in the R2H case. The applicants served a legal Notice on the provincial and federal governments, arguing that the governments' action and inaction with regard to housing and homelessness violated not only several international treaties and covenants to which Canada is a party, but also violated two sections of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*: section 7, the right to life, liberty and security, and section 15, the right not to be discriminated against on the basis, among others, of race, gender, family status and physical or mental disability.

The applicants requested that the federal and provincial governments work together to devise, in consultation with groups directly affected, a national housing strategy. They asked the court to tell our

government to ensure that all Canadians have access to safe, affordable housing.

ACTO staff and volunteers pulled together evidence required for the case (10,000 pages of evidence), including the applicants' stories. Unfortunately, the evidence was never allowed before the courts. For five years we challenged this profound denial of access to justice and the further marginalization of already marginalized groups by the provincial and federal governments. Many interveners went to bat as well, from Amnesty International to the Colour of Poverty to Pivot Legal Society. But when the Supreme Court of Canada refused to weigh in to address this injustice, the case was shut down.

Although the case was shut down, we did win in the end.

We participated in demonstrations to call for affordable housing with groups across the country. We were involved in postcard campaigns to have housing recognized as a human right. We provided workshops to students and community organizations across Canada about the right to housing. We advocated for two bills before the federal parliament that would provide for a national housing strategy.

In February 2018 we travelled to Geneva and made submissions before the United Nations Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social rights about access to justice, the crisis of homelessness in Canada and the need for the state to recognize housing as a human right. In their report the Committee expressed grave concern about the growing crisis in Canada and the lack of a national housing strategy.

Finally, in October 2016 Canadians elected a Liberal government which recognized housing as a human right. The government consulted with individuals and organizations across the country in developing the strategy. They published their findings in a report called "[What We Heard](#)". In April 2017, the federal government [proposed a budget](#) to invest \$11.2 billion over 11 years for the National Housing Strategy.

The strategy will be released in November 2017. ACTO and the R2H coalition are hopeful that the strategy will recognize the right to housing. As importantly, we're hopeful the federal government will also attach sufficient funding to realize this right.