

Housing – Presentation to Community and Protective Services

My name is Margaret Wills. I am the Executive Director of Crouch Neighbourhood Resource Centre. For those of you unfamiliar with Crouch; we are a small (but mighty) social service agency located inside the Crouch Branch library in the heart of the Hamilton Road Community. We provide a myriad of services from an emergency food and baby items cupboard, access to clothing through Mission services, a weekly Men's Lunch program, support for mental illness, addiction and access to housing services; Community Development activities such as fun & food Fridays; afterschool and summer day camp programs and more. I am here to represent not only Crouch Neighbourhood Resource Centre but also, (#) agencies listed and provided in front of you. We are asking that the Community and Protective Services committee present a motion to City Council to have the present affordable and geared to income housing situation in London, declared a crisis and immediately commit money and staff to a solution implementable immediately.

We understand that City of London staff are presently looking at updating the Housing Strategy with consultations, conversations and surveys throughout the city which is always of course, necessary. However, when there is a crisis – let's think of it in terms of a flood or tornado, that's not the time to stop and say that we're going to build a plan.

Food, Clothing, Shelter: These are the very Basic Needs for people. While food and clothing have been made accessible for people in London, shelter is not. We are not a third world country, we are not a country where extensive ghettos are the norm in cities nor, should we be a city where homelessness runs rampant and people are forced to sleep in parks, doorways, in unsafe living conditions, or, when available, in shelters. We are an affluent city with a good quality of life for most and no chance for any kind of quality of life for some.

At Crouch Neighbourhood Resource Centre, we are seeing 3 – 5 people each week who are in need of housing. Past practise was to look for private sector opportunities for accommodation including Boarding Houses, bachelor or one bedroom apartments or, larger accommodations for families based on what their income could cover. Where private sector options were not apparent, our support and advocacy specialist would complete a housing application with our client and, include a letter of support if the need was dire (ie: the person was imminently being evicted; presently homeless; had significant medical issues (ie: cancer treatments, heart surgery required, etc. or, was facing violence in their present accommodations). We are fortunate enough to have the Housing Stability Bank (a service of Salvation Army) located with us each Thursday afternoon so, if there was an issue with first and last months' rent or outstanding utility bills, we are able to easily refer to this service.

At present, we are not finding any appropriately priced, available units in the private sector – even in the Boarding Homes which provide a room and shared washroom facilities. What we are experiencing is an increased number of clients coming to us and advising that they have received notice of eviction as more landlords are undertaking renovations in order to increase rents to coincide with the rest of the rental market.

Our clients are often people who are receiving OW or ODSP benefits. They are the poorest among us. While a number of them would perhaps have received services when psychiatric hospitals existed, they now rely on emergency rooms and when in absolutely dire need, the extremely overloaded services at Parkwood Hospital.

While many of us who found ourselves without a job or, living with a brain injury or, perhaps an addiction would have families to turn to for help; many of our clients have no one. Others, worked many years in labour positions which offered no security and no benefits and, when injury or health issues forced them to stop, there were no other options but OW or, if fortunate, ODSP.

A single person receiving OW receives, at the high end, \$748 per month. \$375 of that is shelter allowance. Even a single room in a Boarding House with shared washroom facilities is now over \$500 per month. That would leave \$248 per month for food, clothing, hygiene, transportation, phone. Social Services like ours can assist with food, clothing, hygiene but not with transportation, phone.

If you are fortunate enough (?) to qualify for ODSP – of course that means that your disability has been properly documented (you may be one of the lucky few to have access to a regular doctor), your monthly income may be as high as \$1150 per month with \$475 for shelter. Still, not enough to cover the cost of a room with a shared washroom and, if living with a disability, not enough to cover the special needs of a disability, especially increased transportation costs if regular visits to drs., tests, etc. are required. There are additional resources available for special needs if you are on ODSP however, they require significant documentation.

So, if you are on benefits, your only hope for accommodation is, rent geared to income housing. And here's where the perfect storm hits. Those apartment units are in such short supply that:

As of April, the present the numbers are:

- 4897 people on the wait list for housing (geared to income)
- 142 people on the Special Priority waitlist (ie: at risk of violence in present living situation)
- 943 urgent homeless (presently homeless. May include staying in shelter, living rough, couch surfing)
- 190 urgent medical (ie: lives with a serious chronic or acute disease requiring treatment)
- 201 urgent social (ie: your children are in the care of CAS until you acquire housing)

A wait of 7 to 10 years is expected. If you have special priority, urgent homeless, medical or social, you may find a place to live within a year.

And what are your options in the meantime?

- couch surfing – if you have anyone in your life who may allow you to stay with them.
- A shelter which may work well unless:

- You are a family: Rotholme Family Shelter is full
- You are a woman facing violence: Women's shelters are full
- You have a pet (often someone's only source of love)
- You are trying to stay free of drugs
- You have a mental illness which is exacerbated by noise, crowds, violence....
- You have had a previous altercation with someone else who is using the shelter (fear)

Unfortunately, the situation has become so dire and affordable housing for the poorest among us so scarce that it is almost like a complacency has set in. At every meeting with other agencies, we check in with one another: "Are you having any success finding housing for people?" The answer is invariably; "No, there is nothing." And no solutions in sight.

Then, on April 26th, at a presentation on Encampment Outreach, the presenter pointed out the statistics regarding the situations of many of the people who are "living rough" or experiencing homelessness. . What was plain to see is that these are the most vulnerable people in our communities.

- Almost half of the people interviewed indicated that their physical health lead to their loss of housing (ie: injury at work, unable to work);
- Almost half indicated that mental health affects their housing stability (including bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, brain injury, sexual assault survivor) ;
- almost half have indicated that they have been attacked or assaulted while homeless (higher for women);
- almost half are homeless due to abuse or trauma;

In effect, what we are doing, is "throwing away" the most vulnerable people in our community. The presentation was informative in terms of how to approach people who are living rough; how to provide them with an opportunity to feel comfortable enough to begin working through a process to help them get housed. However, many of us are already working with homeless people in exactly that manner; we have gained their trust, they are brave enough to share their stories with us; and then, our response is: "Now that we have started the process, the wait for you to find a place to live will be 6 – 8 months (most urgent cases) or longer. And, if that person is precariously housed now, but housed nonetheless, the wait will be 1 – 4 years. That is the only response we have right now whether it is a woman trying to leave violence as the violence against women shelters are full to overflowing; families facing eviction, escaping violence or living with 5 children in a two bedroom apartment; people who are mentally or physically challenged. Our response is the same each time.

When asked about what to do when there is no housing available for people who need some place to live, the presenter, who spends his life looking at homelessness issues responded that: **"There must be the political will to respond."** So, I am asking you to show the political will.

The staff in the housing division of the city are caring and compassionate and want to help us to help our clients. But, at present they have nothing to work with.

We understand that this is an issue across the country, not just in London.

It's taken years for us to get to this point:

To the point where the present stock of geared to income housing is in significant need of repair and where there has been 0 will to build because not raising taxes is the goal over and above having a functional city.

Even before that, when hospitals for the mentally ill were shut down so that we could provide those patients with \$800 per month to live on when rent for a bachelor apartment is \$900 and support them "in the community" with extremely limited resources for Social Service agencies trying to do just that.

We are here today because we see this issue on a daily basis, we work with homeless and precariously housed people every day. And it does no good for us to sit and complain about it when we have no capacity to fix it: We are social service agencies who are in the midst of struggling with continuing funding cuts that require layoffs, reduction of services, no raises for years. You know our stories, we don't have staffing or \$ resources to fix this crisis. But we do have ideas and we do have volunteers who want to help and we do have the will to put whatever we can into this – beginning with asking for you to help.

Hopefully, the new plan currently being developed will provide some opportunities for increasing the present stock of geared to income and affordable units. Already, we have heard some great suggestions and strategies for moving forward, from presenters from other communities, arranged by city staff, who are telling us about the innovative methods being used – such as, solar panels on all new builds to not only negate electricity costs but to contribute to the overall grid; such as, partnerships with private sector landlords who can benefit from making 10 units in each residential building geared to income units; from working with experienced social service agencies to ensure that support services are available to assist people to stay housed.

However, that does not help a family being evicted today.

Needed immediately are some solutions such as:

- money available for motel stays (we have worked with a family who was staying in a motel, leaving them about \$50 per month for all other expenses);
- additional staff hired to work on prepping vacant units as quickly as possible;
- **the opportunity for people receiving benefits (OW or ODSP) to share rental space without being penalized with the deduction of their shelter amount,**
- short-term rental top ups so that people can afford low-priced private sector rent until they are able to access a rent geared to income unit.
- (If it costs \$1500 to support a person in shelter, let's provide those people with \$1,000 instead to either rent in private sector or, motel)
- Immediately make available a piece of land where there is access to washrooms and showers (are there any vacant community centers?) and allow people to camp – without being moved each day. Provide security, regulations regarding pets being tied up (or separate area for people with pets), cleaning and maintenance.

Commit to a working group consisting of a city staff person from each of the following departments:

- Homeless Prevention & Housing
- Planning Department
- A staff member from each of the shelters: Anova, Mission (including Rotholme), Salvation Army, Unity, YOU (pending youth shelter), London Cares and those agencies that have housing first support staff.

Ask this group for a 30 day “stop-gap” solution. Provide needed resources so they can make it happen. I’m happy to participate, facilitate, whatever is needed.

And while this is happening we can hope that the longer term planning process that is taking place will eliminate the need to action a homelessness crisis again.

Again, we are asking that the request for immediate attention and money go forward to City Council for immediate action and, the political will to make significant changes moving forward when staff present the new 5 year plan for approval and political support. The will to do better is essential! Now and moving forward.

Thank you.