

Queen's Park forum draws 100 people to push for housing

By Murray MacAdam

Ontario's deepening housing crisis took centre stage at a Queen's Park forum sponsored by the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) on November 5 that drew 100 people to learn more about the issues and to push for action.

Working for affordable housing is "the work of faith", said Parkdale-High Park MPP Cheri DiNovo, who is also a United Church Minister. "Things have never been worse" in terms of the affordable housing shortage, she added, noting that 130,000 households in Ontario are on waiting lists for low-cost housing.

ISARC Director, Brice Balmer also underscored how people of faith are responding to the issue from their religious values. "We have a vision of wholeness and community," he said. "Embedded in my theology is that all people should live with dignity. Why are the essentials of food and clothing not being met for so many people?"

The forum brought together people of faith to hear from experts and propose ways to improve Ontario's housing situation. Representatives of all three major parties also addressed the forum.

Connie Harrison brought the urgency of the issue with a searing first-hand account of her battle with homelessness while caring for a disabled son. "At one point I was living in a trailer and my husband was bringing in water," she said. Now she lives in Toronto's St. Jamestown neighbourhood, which faces severe problems, including poorly-maintained buildings and social isolation. "We've had so many deaths in public housing. I saw all the suicides. We need lots of housing."

It's time for people of faith to take a tougher stance with government on the housing issue, said Ms Harrison. "You guys are too nice sometimes."

Sharad Kerur from the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, representing 400,000 Ontario tenants, noted that in some ways the situation is actually getting worse, referring to the net loss of 14,000 rental units in the province between 1996 and 2006.

Yet housing success stories were also conveyed, with people speaking enthusiastically of successful housing co-operatives in Mississauga and Kitchener that both provide decent housing and nurture a sense of community among residents.

Again and again the forum heard of the need to keep the pressure up on governments. Because of competing government priorities, funding for affordable housing sometimes gets squeezed out, said Harvey Cooper, from the Cooperative Housing Federation of Canada. "Government does not have to build the housing," he said, "but it has to enable the partners that can build it", such as co-operatives and non-profit developers.

Brian Eng from the Wellesley Institute and the Affordable Housing Network of Ontario also affirmed the key role that government has to play. He applauded the role played by voluntary organizations such as Habitat for Humanity in providing low-cost housing, but added: “We need government to do significant investing. There’s no way around it.”

The Ontario government is currently carrying out a public consultation process to develop a long-term housing strategy for the province, leading to a report to be issued next spring. MPP Mario Sergio, parliamentary assistant to Housing Minister Jim Watson, described affordable housing as “a cornerstone of poverty reduction.”

Mr. Sergio noted the steps taken by the government to help low-income people with their housing needs, including the building of nearly 15,000 units of affordable housing in recent years, 35,000 rent supplements and a rent bank that has helped 21,000 families avoid eviction by providing emergency loans to pay rent arrears.

There is still time to submit your suggestions to the provincial government’s long-term housing strategy consultation. Visit <http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page6405.aspx> to learn more. Submissions are due by December 31.