

ISARC Religious Leaders Forum November 5, 2009 at Queen's Park, Toronto
Affordable Housing – morning session
By Janet Howitt

Morning session

Welcome and opening reflection

Panel of persons living in affordable housing

Three voices presented the issues, challenges and successes of living in rent geared to income municipal housing, a federally funded co-operative, and a non-profit housing community.

Connie Harrison vividly described her feelings when her family was asked to vacate their private rental housing. “From the moment I was going to be homeless I didn’t exist, no one was listening”. She challenged us to acknowledge that all the housing programs and systems funded currently do not work as they are not designed to fit people’s need. Instead, “People have to fit the housing available’.” “We need to ‘quit talking and take action’!”

Harrison identified specific areas of concern:

- young people living in specialized group homes will ‘age out’ and then be faced with finding suitable, affordable accommodation;
- short stay rules at shelters force people to move on, but where do you go when the shelter cannot house you?;
- families cannot remain together and age together when housing is so fragmented;
- gentrification of neighbourhoods raises housing costs, forcing people out of their communities;
- the ‘sell-off’ of Toronto’s ‘Regent Park’ – to build fewer units and add mixed income housing with \$300,000 plus homes and rent geared to income housing with no concern with how the community will take shape.

“Housing people and good models of housing are important to people’s physical, mental and spiritual health”, Harrison concluded.

A resident of the Beaver Creek Housing Co-op in Waterloo, sent comments presented by Paul Hanson.

She stated, “Co-op living is a way of living intentionally.” Beaver Creek is a 27 year old, federally funded co-op where members pride themselves on their diversity, democracy, commitment to families, and lessening their environmental impact. This co-op is built on 4 acres of land with 1 acre set aside for community gardens and green space. All members recycle compost and have shares in community agriculture. Skills are developed and self-esteem enhanced, while working on co-op committees. There are many opportunities for social get-togethers and community building. Presently, 60% of the members pay market rent and 40% rent-geared-to-income. Their negotiated contract with the federal government enables them to assist families, when incomes are reduced, by offering decreased rental costs. Rental arrear

repayment schedules are negotiated individually with the Board to ensure the family can continue to manage.

Mubeen Qureshi (Shalimar Non-profit Housing) stated that coming to Canada 35 years ago, immigrants were better able to find economic security and housing than they are today. Initially mosques developed programming to meet the identified needs of maintaining the Muslim faith and offering language schools. Today housing issues are paramount and the Mosques are not able to fund this.

Qureshi was part of a group that formed Shalimar Non-profit Housing. Initially the chosen neighbourhood rejected the 78 unit Muslim housing project. It was eventually built with a community centre and courtyard included to include on site programming for all family members. Today there are concerns with the aging population and the lack of senior housing at Shalimar and in the surrounding vicinity. Seniors need to move on to make room for families but the lack of senior housing means that they lose their community.

Working with low-German speaking, large rural families in Waterloo Region

by Brice Balmer, ISARC Director

Many Canadian Mennonites left imposing and intrusive governing structures in Canada for a freer life in Mexico. There they raised their families in isolated rural, farming communities. Generations later, faced with harsh economic conditions and increasing security fears, many are returning to Canada and the Mennonite Central Committee is working to assist with resettlement.

These families are large with many children and extended family, poor with few assets, have limited education (most to grade 6 only), and lack English language skills. They have limited job skills having worked as farmers, carpenters and labourers, some have undiagnosed and/or untreated health concerns, and come from a patriarchal, conservative societal structure. But, they also have been found to be resilient and industrious.

In Canada they want to remain in rural settings and their incomes are limited. Affordable, adequate, safe housing in rural communities is difficult to find. Many older farmhouses have not been maintained and are in poor condition, yet they meet the size needs for the family. As tenants, they are fearful of government inspectors who, when finding unsafe conditions, could force them to move or fine their landlords. Affordable social housing is limited or not available in rural areas and often is not large enough for their families. MCC seeks to share God's love with Low German Mennonites by working within a mutually beneficial relationship with local leaders, communities and organizations to enhance their capacity to address such issues as poverty, housing, literacy, education, health, and nutrition.

Panel Discussion

The panel discussion further pursued the theme of families not being able to age together and to care for each other over time. As well the lack of seniors accommodation was highlighted. It ended with a list of what should be asked of politicians:

- 1) Funding, not promises but actual dollars.
- 2) Upfront funding for predevelopment phase to pull groups together, fund plans and gather resources.
- 3) Money for faith groups to work in partnership to develop and build safe, affordable, inclusive, supportive housing.
- 4) Support a portable housing benefit so people can choose where they will live.
- 5) More localized control supporting locally sensitive responses and models.
- 6) Revisit co-op model of mixed housing and integrated communities.

MPPs Introduction and comments

MPPs, who were present and those who planned to attend, were acknowledged.

Mario Sergio, MPP for York West (Toronto), Parliamentary Assistant to Hon. Jim Watson, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing brought greetings from the Minister and invited all delegates to participate in the on-going provincial consultation on Ontario's Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy. He stated that, "Housing is the cornerstone to poverty reduction". The consultation is open until the end of 2009 and the report and 10 year strategy will be released in the spring of 2010.

Frank Klees, MPP for Newmarket-Aurora, brought greetings from the Progressive Conservative Party. He also heads the Policy Advisory Council on Urban Affairs and Housing. He encouraged delegates to share practical ideas that will focus on implementation and action.

Peter Tabuns, MPP for Toronto-Danforth, a former co-op resident, brought greetings from the New Democratic Party and assured the delegates that the NDP is fighting for affordable, secure, safe housing for all Ontarians.

Announcements

Shelley Melanson, Chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario, updated the delegates on the student led campaign for a Poverty Free Ontario, which focuses especially on the increasing cost of tuition and increasing student debt. Materials were distributed and delegates were invited to participate in a rally at 4 p.m. at Queen's Park as part of their November 5th Day of Action.

Students from Redeemer University College in Ancaster distributed postcards they had prepared as part of a class project political campaign – Narrow *the Gap*. They are advocating for the housing benefit put forward by the Daily Bread Food Bank. They asked delegates to support them and sign the cards.

- Lunch -