

How the Community came together to address Homelessness

The Great Fire of 1892, the Tsunami of 1929, the Cod Moratorium of 1992. There can be no question that the people who weathered these challenges relied on a strong sense of community.

Today, a new and growing challenge faces Newfoundland and Labrador: the need for decent, affordable homes in our province. Once more, the community has come together – with remarkable results.

Community Leadership

The St. John's Community Advisory Committee on Homelessness was created in 2000 under the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The Committee is co-chaired by community leader Marie White, former Deputy Mayor of St. John's, and Mike Bruce on behalf of Service Canada. The 27-member Committee brings together members of the community, including shelter and housing providers, all levels of government, the homeless, disability rights activists and others. "It's only because the people around the table really understood the community at large and its needs that we do such a good job," says White. "The inclusion of homeless people on our committee brought a face to our work."

Community Priorities

The Committee oversees the St. John's Community Plan for Addressing Homelessness. The key priorities of the plan include: increased shelter space and alternative shelter options, supportive transitional housing, human resources and community development, and coordination of resources. "I think the people around the table had their priorities right from the get-go," says Service Canada program facilitator Bob Abbott. "They prioritized based on the needs of the community, not the needs of their respective organizations."

"We don't move unless the community supports it," says the Committee's community development worker Bruce Pearce. "The program is community-driven."

National Leadership

Since 1999, the Government of Canada has provided over \$13 million in funding and properties through the National Homelessness Initiative (NHI) to address homelessness in Newfoundland and Labrador. The program has invested \$1.2 billion across Canada.

The NHI has proven to be effective and popular, bringing people together to develop local community plans to address homelessness, and funding initiatives that address local priorities. The United Nations recognized the program as an international best practice in 2002 because of its ground-up approach. Service Canada administers the program in direct consultation with communities.

Service Canada's Mike Bruce says, "You serve your minister best when you serve your community first. The experts are the people who live in communities. The rest of us facilitate the work to make it happen. That's what this model is all about and that's why it works so well."

Provincial Leadership

In addition to capital funding, the Government of Newfoundland & Labrador plays a critical role in supporting the sustainability of community-based NHI projects by investing in their operations. "The NHI funds the capital side, but in order to do that, the project must be financially sustainable. And without exception the provincial government has supported the programming vision with real dollars," says Pearce.

Municipal and Corporate Leadership

Municipal government also plays a key role by providing planning advice and permit approvals for NHI projects. The City of St. John's has donated land and waived property taxes and permit fees for homelessness projects, and is currently completing an affordable housing action plan of its own. "Information is power," says Mike Bruce, "and that's why we've partnered with the City and

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St. John's Community Advisory Committee on Homelessness: (Standing, L to R) Roxie Wheaton/Human Resources, Labour & Employment, Cynthia King/NL Housing Corporation, Gerry Kennedy/NL Housing Corporation, Mike Bruce/Service Canada, Helen Handrigan/City of St. John's, Mary Marshall, Brian Martin/Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation, Bobbie Boland, Bob Abbott/Service Canada, Moyra Buchan/Stella Burry Community Services, Bruce Pearce/Community Development Worker, Gail Tobin/Iris Kirby House, Renee Spurrell/Correctional Services Canada, Amy Percy/St. John's Community Centre Alliance, Sheldon Pollett/Choices for Youth, Wanda Burt/Salvation Army. (Seated, L to R) Wendolyn Schlamp-Hickey/St. John's Status of Women Centre, Anne Stone, Allison Ivany/Association for New Canadians, Michelle Butcher/AIDS Committee of NL, Myrtle Banfield/St. John's Native Friendship Centre Association.

A MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER

For the past 40 years, Newfoundland Labrador Housing (Housing) has been and continues to be committed and willing to listen, learn and work with all community groups and levels of government to find the best possible solutions that will help to provide safe and affordable housing for those most in need throughout our province.

This Government recognizes and supports the need for safe, affordable and sustainable housing and continues to actively address housing issues. An average of \$66 million is allocated to support social rental housing programs in Newfoundland Labrador each year. The province's Provincial Home Repair Program (PHRP), offered through Newfoundland Labrador Housing, annually provides approximately \$7.5 million to over 1,800 households province-wide. Through its various programs, community partnerships, and by working in close co-ordination with various provincial government departments, Housing will continue to provide the best possible assistance to people in the province who are at risk for homelessness.

On behalf of the government of Newfoundland and Labrador, we wish all the partners involved in this year's "Growing Homes" publication much success.



Hon. Shawn Skinner
Minister Human Resources, Labour and Employment
Minister Responsible for Housing



The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador is committed to transforming Newfoundland and Labrador over a ten year period from a province with the most poverty to a province with the least.



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CMHC on the housing action plan. We need solid evidence to support what we're going to do." Meanwhile, corporations such as the Iron Ore Company of Canada, Petro Canada and Zellers have also made significant contributions to several projects.

Challenges Overcome

Before the National Homelessness Initiative, the community had limited capacity to address homelessness. Today, as a result of NHI projects, the community and its partners have greater capacity to deliver solutions. Governments, planners, architects, builders, social workers and affordable housing staff also have a better understanding of how to tackle homelessness.

Challenges remain, however. For every person who has been helped by the NHI, there are still more requiring decent housing and supports, and the needs continue to change and grow.

Community organizations working to provide solutions still face red tape, the challenges of developing new capital projects, and the need to create innovative, responsive services that are financially-sustainable. "The capacity that has been built has to be entrenched," says White. "There needs to be additional capacity built, particularly at the provincial level, to consolidate housing policy and housing-related services to address homelessness."

Future Plans

The NHI is being replaced by the new Homelessness Partnering Strategy, which runs until March 2009. "The community needs to stay in the driver's seat alongside government," says Pearce. "And I would respectfully say to the federal minister: 'Look at the value this program is creating. It's one of the best-managed that the federal government has. It's producing some of the best results. Don't wait until it expires to decide its fate – announce plans to renew it within the next year, and make it a long-term commitment, preferably five years.'"

Meanwhile, Mike Bruce says the Committee will continue to work to address homelessness in St. John's and beyond. "We'd like to really reach out to other places outside of St. John's."

Abbott sees opportunities under the new program to assist communities in new ways. "After we put a roof over their heads, how can we help them move to the next level, with support. That would be the blue sky piece for me – the supports."

White says more resources are needed for seniors and persons with disabilities. She says these needs could be met through a provincial supportive and affordable housing strategy.

Making A Difference

White thinks the NHI work undertaken in St. John's will endure the test of time because it's making a difference in people's lives.

"We know that what's been created and built is nice-looking, is environmentally friendly, is responsive to the needs. On a capital infrastructure level we can say, 'Wow! We can be proud of what we see.'"

"But it's not just about the immediate impacts," says White. "It's about the long term impacts on the populations who are being served. It's about the fact that the community came together to say, 'Here are the people who need us the most, and here are the people we are going to serve.' Because of what has happened, we will have youth who will have a life, we will have women who are safe, and we will have aboriginal people who will feel that they still have connections to their own communities. It's that kind of feel-good stuff." ■

VISIT US ONLINE!

Learn more about *Growing Homes* and our community's plans for decent, affordable housing and shelter services:

www.growinghomes.org

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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