



CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE

## A Roof over our Heads: Affordable Housing in Canada

### The need for affordable housing



Housing is something we all need, regardless of our age, gender or ethnicity, but many of us take it for granted. Access to affordable and suitable housing is one of the core elements of well-being. Housing provides security for families and is often the starting point for involvement in local communities.

Access to housing is also a human right, as identified by the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, Article 25. “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.” Housing is one of the conditions listed as essential along with medical care, food, social services, and support for the unemployed.

However, not all Canadians have access to affordable and suitable housing. In order to pay for housing, many Canadians have to make significant sacrifices in terms of other costs of living, such as nutritious food, decent clothing, and participation within communities. In 2006, 40% of Canadian families paying rent were spending more than 30% of their income on rent, which is considered to be the threshold of affordable housing.

This is especially an issue in Canada’s biggest cities. Rent for an average 2-bedroom apartment in Toronto is \$1096, and the minimum wage in Ontario is \$10.25 an hour. This is the highest minimum wage in the country, but a family with one working parent working full time hours at minimum wage will have a market income of just over \$21,000 per year. When the average cost of rent is factored in, that leaves only \$8000 to spend on all other necessities. British Columbia has the lowest minimum wage in the country at \$8.00 an hour, but Vancouver has the highest average rent in Canada with a cost of \$1169 for an average 2-bedroom apartment. A family with one parent working full time at minimum wage would have even less market income to spend, with just \$2600 for other necessities.

### An opportunity for action: Housing on the federal agenda, Bill C-304

Anxiety about housing is a burden for many families across Canada. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the federal government had a national housing strategy. But this program was eliminated in the mid 1990s, along with many other major spending cuts to social programs. Responsibility for housing was shifted to the provinces which have fewer resources to spend on housing, leaving many in need of affordable and appropriate housing across the country in limbo.

Canada is currently the only country in the G8 not to have a national housing strategy. There has been pressure for the development of a strategy from within Canada, and even international organizations like the United Nations have called for the creation of a national housing strategy. The UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing raised concerns about the sheer number of homeless in Canada, especially for a developed country.

It is for these reasons that Vancouver East Member of Parliament Libby Davies introduced Private Member's Bill C-304: *An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians*. Bill C-304 does not create a housing strategy, but it requires the federal government to work with the provinces and municipalities to develop a national housing strategy. The bill also lays out basic elements that must be part of the strategy, including special consideration for seniors and people with disabilities, and specific plans for certain disadvantaged groups, such as Aboriginal Canadians and new immigrants.

### **Bill C-304: What you can do**

Most legislation in Canada is introduced by the government, but individual MPs can create Private Members' bills. These bills, however, are much more difficult to pass, since time spent on Private Members' bills is limited and it is difficult to obtain the support of a majority. Bill C-304 was introduced in the House of Commons in February 2009, and passed second reading in September 2009. Second reading means that the bill is approved in principle, and it is then sent to a parliamentary committee for in-depth study and a clause-by-clause review. If the committee approves the bill (with or without amendments), it is sent back to the House for a third reading and final vote. The bill then repeats the same process in the Senate.

As it moved through the Parliamentary process, Bill C-304 had the support of all three opposition parties and was originally scheduled for a third reading in late April 2010. But an amendment made at committee for an opt-out clause for Quebec has threatened the support of the Bloc Québécois Party. The third reading was therefore delayed. Without the support of the Bloc or the governing Conservative Party, the Bill will not pass in the House.

With Bill C-304 in danger of failing, it is important to engage our Parliamentarians on this crucial issue. You can write to your MP and remind them of the importance of housing and the need for a national housing strategy. Encourage your MP to support the bill and to work with other parties to ensure that this bill is adopted by Parliament. There is no reason why everyone cannot enjoy the security of a home.

### **Additional Resources:**

Bill C-304: *An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians*  
[http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Bills/403/Private/C-304/C-304\\_1/C-304\\_1.PDF](http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Bills/403/Private/C-304/C-304_1/C-304_1.PDF)

Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation  
<http://www.equalityrights.org/cera/>

Citizens for Public Justice: *Advocacy Tool Kit*  
<http://www.cpj.ca/files/docs/AdvocacyToolkit3.pdf>

Citizens for Public Justice: *Time to Ensure Housing for All: A CPJ Position Paper on Housing and Homelessness*  
<http://www.cpj.ca/files/docs/per-on-Housing-and-Homelessness-finalversion.pdf>

The Salvation Army: *Poverty shouldn't be a Life Sentence: A report on the perceptions of homelessness and poverty in Canada*  
<http://salvationarmy.ca/documents/PovertyReport2010.pdf>

Senate Subcommittee on Cities: *In from the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness*  
<http://www.parl.gc.ca/40/2/parlbus/commbus/senate/com-e/citi-e/rep-e/rep02dec09-e.pdf>