



# The Alliance to End Homelessness

[www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca](http://www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca)

## COMMENTS BY CHAIR PERRY ROWE

At the March 31, 2009 Media Conference to release fifth

### Report Card on Ending Homelessness in Ottawa, Jan–Dec 2008

#### *Billions for banks while Ottawa shelters overflow: children and youth hardest hit*

As many of you know, the Report Card is produced with the involvement of our many member agencies who work together to gain a better understanding of homelessness and to advocate for strategies to end it.

Over a year many stories about homelessness are brought to the public's attention. Our Report Card is the opportunity to make sense of what is happening by looking at the city's progress in combating the crisis of homelessness by comparing what happened in 2008 with 2007.

#### How did the city fare in 2008?

The grades for 2008 are ones that no parent – or government – would want to see. We examine four areas – **housing, income, homelessness** and **length of shelter stay**. The grades for each area show a troubling picture of a community without enough affordable housing.

- **Housing was graded a 'D'**, indicating some loss of progress.
- **Income was graded a 'C'** because there was no or slight progress.
- **Homelessness was graded 'D'**. This indicator reports on the number of people living in Ottawa who had to stay in an emergency shelters and, in 2008, our community lost ground.
- Finally, we grade how long people stay in the shelters before they find housing. **Length of shelter stay was graded a 'D'** because we lost ground here too.

#### **In 2008, we saw a 15.2% increase in the number of families using Ottawa's shelter system.**

- There were 747 homeless families with 1,179 children under 16 years old.
- The number of different people using the shelter system went up by 7.2% (to 7,045 individuals) in 2008.

**Since mid-2008, the demand for shelter beds has been surging** and all of Ottawa's emergency shelters have been running out of beds every night.

**Up to 100 people are sleeping on the floor every night.** With the shelters and the many service agencies in this city at the edge of their capacity to handle much more, our fear is that some people will fall through the cracks, especially now in a faltering economy, despite the best efforts of these agencies to coordinate and make sure everyone is helped.

Worse yet, people stayed an average of five days longer than in 2007 and we saw a **dramatic 13% increase in the use of shelter beds. The average length of stay in shelters was up to 51 days** from 46 days the year before. **Families stayed the longest in shelters for an average of 53 days. Youth had the shortest stay at 46 days but that represented a 70% increase over 2007.** The average length of stay in an Ottawa shelter has been increasing since 2006.

The length of stay increases the possibility of adding to anyone's troubles.

Fifty-one days is a very long time. Imagine the potential for worsening or creating physical and mental health problems. Imagine what happens to a person's ability to participate in our community when they

can't find affordable and appropriate housing.

### **Shelter use in Ottawa has increased over the 2004-2008 period we've issued the Report Card.**

The Report Card's housing market indicator show that the **vacancy rate for rental units went down to 1.4%** in Ottawa in 2008, while the average rent for a **one-bedroom apartment went up by 3.6% to \$827** a month.

There were **only 134 new units of affordable housing in 2008. In 2007 only 74 units** were created in total so 134 is moving in the right direction, but the small growth does not offer much hope to the large number of people who are homeless or at risk of losing their housing.

Keep in mind that the **City of Ottawa target to increase affordable housing is 500 units a year**. The 2008 units include 10 shelter or transitional spots, 98 permanent rental-supportive units and 26 households who took part in the long-term affordable ownership option.

The average rents went up considerably more than the 2% increase in Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program benefits. The number of OW cases decreased by 967 in 2008, but that is balanced by the increase in ODSP cases by 1,143 to 20,113.

Even though the **minimum wage** increased 9.4% to \$8.75, it would take an hourly wage of \$12.90 to rent a Bachelor or \$15.90 an hour to afford a one bedroom apartment using the government's affordability standard of 30% of income for housing.

**The 2008 statistics on efforts to prevent homelessness** complete this troubling picture of a community without enough affordable housing.

- Some **1,116 households at the final point in the eviction process** were helped by Housing Loss Prevention workers.
- The households near eviction were among the nearly 11,000 households helped in 2008 across the city.
- The number helped was up 12% over 2007. Prevention programs have grown over the last several years; without them the numbers of homeless people would be expected to increase even more.

### **Ordinary people across the city take action to help homeless people.**

- Many thousands of people put in over **700,000 hours of service a year as volunteers** in agencies supporting homeless people.
- These wonderful volunteers seem to know more than our elected officials about Ottawa's worsening situation.
- **Pages 5 to 12 in the 2008 Report Card give a picture of the Made-in-Ottawa solutions people in Ottawa can be very proud of.**

**People don't become homeless in a vacuum.** Events are taking place at the municipal, provincial and federal levels which underscore the failure of those governments to end homelessness.

- All governments are content to leave communities to manage it.
- Pages 13 to 15 examine the three tiers of government in terms of ending homelessness. You'll find the funding share of homelessness and housing spending for each tier in our community.

**The City of Ottawa** seems to be abandoning its modest commitment to a dedicated affordable housing branch. Several weeks ago City Council let go of Ottawa's Housing Director, and in last week's layoffs, it let go of its very experienced homelessness services manager. The City's staffing in the areas of housing and homelessness has been too small to lose anyone!

We have 'heard' there may be a new 'affordable housing unit' reporting to the Director of Planning but **that position is vacant.**

- All of this is happening at a time when – *finally* – there is more provincial and federal affordable housing money available to Ottawa.

It's very hard to have any confidence the City will get many units built in 2009, never mind its target of 500 units. There seems to be no strategic planning for housing.

Combined with this lack of municipal political leadership, Ottawa is seeing only **modest, albeit welcome, proposals to create affordable housing.**

- The business, community leaders and government representatives in *The Ottawa Leadership Table on Homelessness*, has set a goal to annually create 100 units of supported housing for people who are chronically homeless.
- The *Community Action Plan on Homelessness* recommends that 50 units of transitional housing and 100 units of new supportive housing be created annually.
  - To help the majority of homeless people, the Action Plan recommends that 50 units of affordable rental housing per year be developed through the private sector for capital funding and private-public-non-profit partnerships
  - and that Ottawa take part in the *Homeownership Down Payment Assistance Program*.

When 747 families become homeless in one year and can't find a home for an average of 53 days, these are very modest approaches for Canada's fourth largest city.

**In our view big problems require big ideas! We'll make real gains in ending homelessness when communities have enough affordable housing.**

**The Federal Government extended** the *Affordable Housing Initiative*, the *Homelessness Partnering Strategy*, and the *Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program* for five years.

- Unfortunately the funding **has been frozen at \$135 million annually for the entire country for the past 10 years.**
- At the same time it has **made no commitment to reinvesting surpluses** from expiring social housing operating agreements to develop new affordable housing.

**The stimulus package in the Federal Budget did include housing, but unfortunately, there was nothing additional for families and individuals who are homeless.**

- The focus was on people with housing.
- We were very glad to see money to help communities' repair social housing and to add affordable housing units for seniors and disabled people.
- But most of the new dollars will flow quickly to people who already own their home and want to do home renovations.

In the next two years, the hundreds of thousands across Canada who will experience homelessness or live in precarious housing situations won't get any additional money for programs or new housing to assist them.

**In last week's Provincial Budget**, Ontario did match the federal stimulus funding,

- But at the same time Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing was handed a six per cent cut, the biggest of any provincial ministry. Over the last three years that Ministry has seen a drop of \$222 million, or almost 25%.

- Over the next few years we're not likely to see Ontario commit to much affordable housing outside of the current stimulus money.

**We understand there's to be a housing consultation this spring and we will participate.** We do think that Ontario's need for much more affordable housing and for incomes high enough to allow more people to stay housed have been demonstrated enough already.

- The waiting lists for social and supportive housing here and across the province combined with the thousands of people who are homeless every year tell a very clear story.

The 2008 Report Card tells us homelessness keeps growing and it remains a major issue in this community.

It's time to **name where the responsibility lies for the failure to end homelessness.** It's an appalling, shameful situation, but so far government responses have failed.

### **CALL FOR A FORMAL INVESTIGATION**

**We are calling for A FORMAL INVESTIGATION at the federal and Ontario level into the lack of progress in ending homelessness.**

Our five-year homelessness trend analysis makes it clear that it is the time to initiate such an investigation. Each government's record is shameful. It's not enough to help people while they are homeless. In the vast majority of cases, it shouldn't happen in the first place!

**Only a major shift in federal and provincial policies on affordable housing, income levels and supports can lead the way to end homelessness.**

Last October, the federal government announced plans to buy up to \$25 billion in insured mortgage pools through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation\*.

If the federal government can find \$25 billion to help our banks, why hasn't it acted more decisively to end homelessness?

*Perry Rowe*

*March 31, 2009*

**English and French PDF versions of the Report Card are posted on the ATEH website –**  
[www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca](http://www.endhomelessnessottawa.ca)

\* <http://www.fin.gc.ca/n08/08-075-eng.asp> "Last October, the federal government took steps to maintain the availability of longer-term credit in Canada by purchasing up to \$25 billion in insured mortgage pools through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) to act to address the scarcity of private sector lending to Canadian mortgage markets and lending markets overall in an effort to make loans and mortgages more available and more affordable for ordinary Canadians and businesses."